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MINDING THE GAP:
Moral Disagreement and the Limits of Moral Reasoning

MEZERY V ROZUMĚNÍ:

Morální neshoda a meze morálního zdůvodňování

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Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá tématem přetrvávajícího morálního nesouhlasu a jeho významu pro morální filosofii, zejména v souvislosti s problémy, které představuje pro morální realismus a koncept objektivních morálních pravd. Hlavním cílem je prozkoumat standardní vysvětlení příčin přetrvávajícího nesouhlasu v morálních otázkách a zvážit epistemologické potíže, jež tento jev znamená pro zastánce objektivního pojetí morální pravdy a možnosti obecně rozšířené shody v morálních názorech. Obhájci těchto pozic typicky spoléhají na logické usuzování a zdůvodňování jako prostředky k vyřešení neshod a opodstatnění morálních názorů. Nedávné empirické výzkumy v oblasti morální psychologie nicméně rozporující tradiční pojetí morálního usuzování. Ve světle těchto empirických poznatků se zaměřím na možnosti racionálního řešení morálního nesouhlasu. Na základě tohoto zkoumání budu tvrdit, že empirické omezení lidského uvažování a zdůvodňování utvářejí meze možnosti objasnění a opodstatnění morálních soudů, kteréžto maří naděje na dosažení racionálně odůvodněného poznání objektivní morální pravdy, jakož i šance na racionální vyřešení přetrvávajících morálních neshod.

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with persistent moral disagreement and its relevance for contemporary debates in moral philosophy, particularly with regard to the problems it poses for moral realism and the notion of moral objectivity. The main objective is to consider standard explanations of prevalent disagreement about moral issues and epistemological challenge that its persistence presents for the views defending the idea of stance-independent moral facts and the possibility of widespread rational convergence of moral views. The proponents of commonly rely on reasoning as the preferred method of resolving disagreements and justifying moral beliefs. However, recent empirical works in moral psychology challenging the traditional conception of moral judgement. In the light of these empirical findings, I consider prospects of moral disagreement being resolved rationally. Following this examination, I argue that the empirical limitations of human reasoning create an explanatory and justificatory gap, undermining the prospects for rationally justified knowledge of objective moral facts, as well as a chance of rational resolution of persistent moral disagreements.

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INTRODUCTION

Disagreement is one of the distinct experiences of social interaction. People often disagree about various subjects ranging from personal beliefs and values to empirical facts abouts the world. It seems that different types of disagreement may be perceived differently. Those associated with subjective, personal opinions and preferences are commonly treated as less significant than disagreements about the questions which supposedly have objective answers. In such cases, the occurrence of disagreement seems to undermine one's certainty that their view is evident and unequivocal, as the disagreement provides a reason to reconsider own position and doubt that one's belief is sufficiently justified. This is especially relevant for disagreement concerning purportedly factual subject matters, when both – or at least one the parties – believes that their disagreement is about objective, stance-independent truths. On this view, if there is a disagreement involving two incompatible beliefs, it suggests that tat least one of the parties is mistaken.

In this thesis, I am going to focus on the issues pertaining to the problem of disagreement in moral discourse from the perspective of contemporary moral philosophy. In the first chapter, I will consider the question of disagreement about moral matters and its significance for moral theory and practice. I also consider the role of moral disagreement in contemporary moral philosophy, particularly in the field of metaethics. Some moral disagreements seem particularly persistent, prevailing even between apparently rational and knowledgeable people. This led many philosophers to argue that the persistence of disagreement casts doubt on the notion of objective moral truth and moral realism, a theoretical position which, as I will explain, seems particularly threatened by moral disagreement due to its commitment to the claim that there are stance-independent moral facts or objective moral reasons.

Generally speaking, persistent moral disagreement entails a number of problems for moral theory and practice, such as the problem of explaining its causes, or the question of possible resolution of apparently intractable moral disputes.

In the second chapter, I explain the challenge moral disagreement is thought to pose to moral realism and explain the argument from disagreement as a part of the metaphysical challenge. However, my primary objective is to consider the epistemological challenge of disagreement and scepticism about explanation and justification of moral beliefs, which is based on the notion that intractable moral disagreement seems incompatible with the realist conception of moral knowledge. Moral realists presented a number of responses to the questions of disagreement, and I will review the most common of their replies in the third chapter, as well as the arguments supporting these explanatory accounts of disagreement. I will also consider the realist arguments defending the possibility of rational convergence in moral views.

Because moral inquiry in general, and disagreements in particular, involve the process of moral reasoning, in the fourth chapter, I review the empirical accounts of moral judgement and reasoning in interpersonal disagreements. I will examine the potential relevance of empirical evidence for moral philosophy with respect to the moral realist views concerning rational convergence of moral views and the justification of moral beliefs. I will argue that empirical findings, especially recent empirical research in the field of moral cognition, do not seem compatible with the realist views on the resolvability of persistent moral disagreement. In the final chapter, I outline the epistemological challenge to moral realism aided by the empirical accounts of moral reasoning. This challenge concerns actual, real-world disagreement, and the problems with epistemic justification of moral beliefs. I argue that this challenge is amplified by empirical works in moral psychology, which undermine the reliability of moral intuitions, as well as the methods of justification. I contend that if the empirical account of moral reasoning is true, moral disagreement would prevail even under epistemically favourable conditions.

It is not the principal objective of this thesis to provide a conclusive argument for or against a particular metaethical position. Nevertheless, I aim to show that moral disagreement presents a significant problem for moral realism and that – in light of the empirical accounts of moral psychology – the prospects of achieving widespread rational convergence in moral views are rather bleak.

The "gap" in the title refers to a potential explanatory and justificatory gap; one that needs to be addressed and closed if moral realism is to provide a tenable account of moral knowledge. In particular, the moral realist theories need to provide an explanatory account of persistent disagreement, one that is compatible with their conception of moral knowledge, and to clarify how actual disagreement can be resolved and people obtain true and justified moral beliefs.

While moral disagreement gives rises to several challenges to moral realism, it is the nature of moral judgement and reasoning, I shall argue, that solidify the challenge of disagreement with respect to the problem of epistemic justification of moral beliefs. Moral reasoning, deliberation and argumentation have been traditionally viewed as a default way of examining moral issues and sorting out interpersonal disagreements in a rational, philosophically sound manner. However, recent empirical works in moral psychology arguably undermine presumptions about the effectivity and reliability of these methods. If the empirical accounts of moral psychology are correct, I will argue, the hopes for widespread rational convergence of moral views are faint, and it further amplifies the epistemological challenge of disagreement to moral realism.

I. PERSISTENT MORAL DISAGREEMENT

In our daily life, we can observe that people maintain numerous moral views and frequently express their opinions and convictions in relation a variety of subjects or everyday situations. This typically consists in making judgements about particular acts, attitudes, or people and their character, and expressing such judgments in reference to purported moral status, i.e. being moral or immoral, of the matter in question. Just as it is common to privately consider moral aspects of some course of action – and take it into account (or ignore it) before or after we act – it is also common to share our views and beliefs with the others, which may often include giving reasons in order to justify our position.

For many people, their moral beliefs have significant bearing on their everyday decisions and general conduct. Moral judgements, in one way or another, constitute a recognisable part of ordinary experience of our daily life. But so is the experience of being confronted with the opinions of other people who maintain slightly or radically different views. In such cases, people get involved in a disagreement about their moral views, which may concern moral aspects of particular behaviour, general attitudes and preferences, as well as moral theories and entire worldviews. Consider some examples. Two classmates discuss moral aspects of cheating during exams, parent try to dissuade their pregnant daughter from having an abortion, political parties argue over the question of sending military aid to a souvereign country in order to prevent war crimes committed there by a terrorist organization. There are plenty of controversial topics overlapping with everyday life of ordinary people, as well as with politics and a range of global or societal issues.[1]

What is the actual problem with moral disagreement – and how does it relate to the philosophical credibility of various moral theories, metaethical as well as normative? Disagreement appears to be a widespread phenomenon and its occurrence is not limited only to moral questions. What makes the existing moral disagreement a matter of potential concern, however, is its prevalence and persistence, and it seems to call into question the notion of moral objectivity. David Hume described this sceptical response in relation to moral disagreements in the following way:

"Yet, I must confess, that this enumeration puts the matter in so strong a light, that I cannot, at present, be more assured of any truth, which I learn from reasoning and argument, than that personal merit consists entirely in the usefulness or agreeableness of qualities to the person himself possessed of them, or

[1] See for example Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 244-270.

to others, who have any intercourse with him. But when I reflect, that, though the bulk and figure of the earth have been measured and delineated…yet men still dispute concerning the foundation of their moral duties: When I reflect on this, I say, I fall back into diffidence and scepticism, and suspect, that an hypothesis, so obvious, had it been a true one, would, long ere now, have been received by the unanimous suffrage and consent of mankind."[2]

Disagreements occur in many areas of life, perhaps all, be it about particular decision, various sensations, or purportedly factual claims. The subject matters of frequent disagreements range from choosing the destination for next family holiday to the topics like politics, economics, or science. However, when people disagree about the truth of factual matters, such as, what the current population of the world is, or whether eating chocolate can treat depression, they seem to approach their disagreement differently than those who attribute their disputes to different personal preferences, such as the opinion whether chocolate ice cream is tastier than vanilla ice cream.

On the face of it, these disagreements seem easier to settle, as people appear to be more willing to reconcile with each other and relativise their differences, often adopting an attitude characterised by the popular, albeit perhaps overused slogans "Everyone is entitled to their opinion!" or "Let's agree to disagree." Yet, there are also disagreements concerning more serious matters, for instance, disputes various moral issues and controversial questions, in which people hesitate to move on with some sort of propitiatory reaction, oftentimes seeming ready to engage in a confrontation, or at least vocally express their disapproval and assert their view. Moral disagreements, which usually pertain to the subjects of philosophical inquiry in the field of normative ethics, are in many cases persistent and intractable, as people's moral beliefs seem to be rather diverse, and while some are more tolerant of the views maintained by the others, for many, moral principles and rules seem to be almost non-negotiable, and they vehemently deny that moral issues are simply a matter of individual preference.

Nonetheless, while it appears that people tend to reject a relativistic approach to moral topics in general, experiencing disagreement about particular moral questions might entail various unexpected consequences, especially if both parties put forward thought-out, compelling arguments. Not only does it expose the contrast between their view and the one of their opponents, but it might evoke the state of

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[2] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 152.

epistemic uncertainty, casting doubt on the validity of their original view, or unambiguous nature of the issue in question, potentially motivating them to reconsider their position or ponder who is actually right. From a philosophical perspective, disagreement is often considered in terms of its epistemological relevance, that is, with regard to the broader questions of proper knowledge, justification and the methods of dealing with disagreement.

Bernard Williams observed that the occurrence of disagreement seems to somehow challenge the idea of objective knowledge, noting that "discussions of objectivity often start from considerations about disagreement."[3] Even though it does not have to be this way, Williams adds, and disagreement does not need to be fully eliminated or defused, only sufficiently explained. For neither disagreement nor agreement is universal, and although disagreement does not necessarily have to be overcome, it requires some sort of explanation, not only with regard to its causes, but also – if the notion of objectivity is to be reasonably sustained – an explanation of convergence between people, i.e. a credible explanation as to how disagreement *can* be resolved or *would* be resolved under the most favourable conditions.[4]

However, the question of practical implications of apparently intractable real-life disagreements is also relevant, as disagreement also casts doubt on justification of particular beliefs about which they disagree. How should people respond to the cases of persistent disagreement? And, if one believes that all or at least many moral disputes can be resolved, what is the best way of doing so? To understand the different aspects of the problems posed by moral disagreement, I will first consider various types of disagreement, following by the specific nature of moral disagreements and the contemporary debates on its significance for moral philosophy.

Varieties of Disagreement

As I have noted, disagreements vary in many respects, not only with regard to their subject matter or the perception of its epistemic status, but also in terms of their character and underlying principles. People may disagree about a myriad of topics and the content of their disputes might include particular or general

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[3] Bernard Williams, "The Scientific and the Ethical," in *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*, ed. Paul K. Moser and John D. Trout (New York: Routledge, 1995), 289.

[4] Willimas is particularly concerned with the best explanation of potential convergence, i.e. what would be its cause under the most favourable conditions – see Williams, "The Scientific and the Ethical," 291.

issues, as well as peculiar question pertaining to various areas of interest or specific fields of inquiry. We can thus speak about moral disagreements, scientific disagreements, political disagreements, and so forth. Assessing disagreement with reference to these domains is undoubtedly relevant in terms of proper categorization of various topics and matters of contention. Philosophical analysis of disagreement can, however, take a different approach by looking at the distinct features of different instances of disagreement and studying their form and qualitative typology. To explicate the peculiarity of moral disagreement, we need to consider different types of disagreement with respect to the underlying principles on which they operate. This will help us to navigate the debate on moral disagreement in the context of contemporary moral philosophy and epistemology.

But disagreement about beliefs, or "factual disagreement", is not the only kind of disagreement. This becomes evident when we consider archetypal moral questions highlighting what is commonly regarded as the general aim of ethical inquiry, namely, what one should do. Sometimes, people disagree over the question of what to do in a situation.

These disputes involve *practical reasoning* or *deliberation about what is to be done*[5] instead of about what is true and false. Such disagreements thus concern *action*[6] rather than about *beliefs*.[7] Yet, this distinction, one might argue, in some cases seems rather arbitrary, considering that practical reasoning is typically guided by beliefs people hold to be true. So if the beliefs change, so does – fully, or at least partially – the basis for

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[5] Williams, "The Scientific and the Ethical," 289.

[6] Richard Feldman, "Clifford's Principle and James' Options," (2006): 24, 26. For another relevant distinction with regard to metaethical expressivism (which denies that moral judgements are of same kind as ordinary non-moral beliefs), see the discussion on Simon Blackburn's notion of 'practical attitudes' and Allan Gibbard's 'disagreement in plan' in Ridge, "Disagreement," 46, 49-50.

[7] The contrast between the disagreements and interpersonal reasoning concerning beliefs (i.e. 'what is true') and the disagreements concerning actions (i.e. 'what to do') is implicated in the distinction between *epistemic* and *practical* reasoning – see, for example, the terminology employed by Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112ff., who contrasts these two concepts in relation to his analysis of rationality and reasons, although Parfit introduces this classification mainly to explicate two distinct types of rationality and individual differences with regard to desires and beliefs. I will discuss Parfit's account of rationality in detail in Chapter 2. Other authors sometimes refer to the 'epistemic' (or belief-based) area as to the 'theoretical' (in contrast to the 'practical') reasoning. In either case, 'epistemic' or 'theoretical' rationality is meant to be linked to people's beliefs and the norms that direct and coordinate them, while the 'practical' kind of rationality refers to the rationality of people's actions, or reasons and – on some views – also the desires ('rational desires') motivating actions, see Jonathan Pugh, "Four Distinctions Concerning Rationality," in *Autonomy, Rationality, and Contemporary Bioethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020): 21-23, particularly footnotes 3 and 9. See also Gilbert, Harman, Kelby Mason, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Reasoning," in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John M. Doris and the Moral Psychology Research Group (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 206-245.

practical disagreement. As Michael Smith[8] notes in reference to particular moral views, we normally expect that when people's beliefs change, they will also adjust their goals and behaviour accordingly. In addition to that, factual disagreement might have practical outcomes too, prompting an action or reaction, albeit only on the epistemic level. People's beliefs are not just an outcome of mere passive reception of mind, but they are subject to cognitive processing, which – at least to some extent – involves explicit, conscious mental activity.

Suppose that they come across new empirical evidence and a person is convinced that their initial position was incorrect, modifies their view to be consistent with the new evidence. But this modification itself constitutes an action in some sense as well, i.e. an *intellectual act* of revising one's beliefs prompted by reflective thinking and conscious, deliberative evaluation. Drawing a distinction between disagreement in beliefs and practical disagreement is important, but it should be noted that it is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Disagreement in beliefs is sometimes identified with '*theoretical* disagreement', as this is considered to denote the polar opposite of the notion of practical reasoning constituting disagreement about action. However, I believe that this is reductive and potentially misleading. It is true that practical and theoretical reasoning represent two distinctive approaches to reflective thinking; the first being involving decision-making in relation to the course of action, while the latter involves speculative reasoning, explanations and examination of beliefs.

There is another type of distinction to be made, i.e. a distinction between factual disagreement and *evaluative* disagreement. In this respect, disagreement concerning matters of fact can be contrasted with disagreement about matters of taste. The first category corresponds with our earlier considerations of typical disagreement in belief. It covers factual statements representing people's beliefs about the world and how it is. On the other hand, disagreement concerning matters of taste can broadly refer to personal evaluations pertaining to various areas and subjects. This may include different preferences, interests, or attitudes expressing approval or disapproval. Although a person adopting an approving stance on some subject most likely seems to be inclined to pursue it in the *practical* sense, their stance actually expresses only their evaluation and this expression does not automatically warrant or entail any action, not does it necessarily involve practical reasoning in terms of direct decision-making about what to do. A disagreement between two people ensues when they put forward two evaluative statements contradicting each other.

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[8] Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 6-7.

Two people may disagree with each other about the statement "Jimmy is funny" or "This chair is comfortable." These are *evaluative statements* which are by many considered *subjective***,** which means that two opposite statements expressed by different people are not mutually exclusive, i.e. they can be true at the same time. The hard, factual descriptors (such as "Jimmy's height is 180 cm") can be reported in the evaluative way, e.g. "Jimmy is tall"), which will be true for some and untrue for the other. Even these more complex examples show that some statements that seem to be reporting matters of factual beliefs – which applies to being 'fast', 'expensive', or even 'dangerous' and so forth – are also evaluative judgments. Along with the views concerning likability, attractiveness, comicality, such claims are largely understood as expressing *appraiser-relative judgements*, and include matters of taste, preferential attitudes, but also perception or conception of something in relation to an individual or a social group.

If person A claims that person B is smart, it could be construed as descriptive, factual statement, referring to some standards or measurements of smartness, but some would point out that it an evaluative statement about personal qualities which are subject to individual perception and appreciation, and that someone being smart is a matter of subjective judgement, albeit perhaps less arbitrary than claims that someone is funny, pleasant, or charismatic. Others might see it as somewhere in between the two, not equal to the exact, 'hard' traits such as physical height or weight, but not as subjective as claiming that someone is a pleasant person. Saying that "Ben is smart" seems to be akin to statements such as "Ben is tall" or "Ben is strong", statements concerning matters of perspective, hence being true or factual only in a *relative* sense. On this view, such judgements are appraiser-dependent, whereas those broadly understood as *objective* are appraiser-independent.

The dichotomy between matters of fact and matters of taste might be considered too broad or too vague for the purposes of rigorous analysis, so many philosophers employ their own terminology, oftentimes tailored to fit the particular philosophical problem they want to address rather than put forward as a comprehensive theory of disagreement. David Hume discussed aesthetic evaluations and the apparent lack of objectivity in the matters of taste, arguing that beauty is not a quality inherent in the objects of the world, but it "exists merely in the mind which contemplates them",[9] hence, it is perceived differently.

[9] Hume considered aesthetic appreciations to be clearly analogous with the sense of taste and perception of flavour, claiming that the qualities associated with both of these areas (e.g. beauty and ugliness, or sweetness and bitterness) are matters of individual perception and sense experience, while neither of the said properties exists objectively (in the realist sense), claiming

Bernard Williams wanted to prevent conceptual conflation of moral evaluations with other kinds of evaluative judgements, such as the aesthetic kind, so in his discussion on the question of objectivity, he focused chiefly on the difference between "the scientific" and "the ethical"[10] disagreement. Willimas prefers these terms over "the factual" and "the evaluative", claiming that evaluative disagreements cover other areas such as aesthetic judgment.[11] He nevertheless associates morality with evaluative disagreements and argues that it is substantially different from disagreements about objective facts about the world,[12] i.e. "the scientific" disagreements in his terminology, or the "factual"[13] disagreements according to the terminology used in this paper.

Distinctiveness of Moral Disagreement

There is some disagreement among philosopher regarding this way of classifying moral disagreement. Some believe that there are moral disagreements are not only evaluative and practical, but also *factual*, concerning moral truths conceptualized as facts about the world. On this view, scientific and the ethical disagreements are not fundamentally different. Moral discourse is precisely about the facts and moral disagreement is about people's beliefs pertaining to the reality, and it this case it resembles scientific disagreements (in the ordinary sense, i.e. the matters concerning empirical facts about the world). It is worth noting that there is an important difference between explaining moral disagreement as being about matters of fact and asserting that morality consists in actual matters of fact, that is, that moral judgements

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that they "exists merely in the mind which contemplates them." David Hume, "Of the standard of taste," in *Essays moral, political and literary by David Hume* Vol. 1, ed. Thomas H. Green and Thomas H. Grose (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964): 268.

[10] Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 289-291. Although Williams famously distinguished between morality and ethics ((claiming that morality is a narrower system within the broader category of the ethical, suggesting that morality (in terms of its understanding in modern Western culture) involves a peculiar set of assumptions and addresses particularly some ethical notions, such as a specific notion of obligation), his concept of "the ethical" disagreement does not seem to substantially differ from "moral disagreement" in the general sense, or rather in the sense of the term which is commonly used in contemporary philosophical literature (as well as in this paper). For Wiliams' distinction between morality and ethics, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6-7.

[11] Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 292.

[12] Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 302.

[13] This terminology differs only in that sense that I consider the 'scientific' to be a subcategory of the 'factual disagreements' as a more general category. I reserve the first term for the disagreements within the field of science, while the latter also includes general (lay) disagreements about the state and events of the world.

express factual beliefs about the properties of the world.[14] We will consider these differences and positions maintaining them in the second part of this chapter.

The experience of moral disagreement might lead to more than just cognitive dissonance or epistemic uncertainty on the part of those involved in it. People are rarely indifferent when it comes to actual clash of moral beliefs or practices. On most occasions, people attempt to resolve their moral disagreements by the means of reasoning with each other.[15] Although they could perhaps approach it like some other disagreements (e.g. about the best ice-cream flavour[16]) by accepting that there is a difference of opinions or individual preferences, it has been argued that one of the notable characteristics of moral disagreement is that people are generally much less willing to simply accept the difference of opinions as a matter of fact and move on to another topic. One's own moral considerations are often appraised as almost equal to moral judgements of other people. Since moral beliefs and attitudes of individuals or social groups often seem incompatible.

Sharing and comparing individual views is a common tendency among people, being a significant feature of social interaction.[17] While some may do so simply to let the others know about their position, or purely for academic reasons, hence providing a *descriptive* account of their position, expressing moral judgements in ordinary discourse is typically understood to entail *normativity*. That is, in our daily conversations, moral judgments are usually understood in relation to implicit *normative meaning* that they are supposed to carry. Claiming that "A considers X morally wrong" thus implies that "A ought not to do X" (or "A ought not have done X", if this assessment concerns one's past actions).

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[14] Both of these positions refer to metaethical cognitivism, which will be discussed in the following section, but the first is compatible moral anti-realism and the second only with moral realism.

[15] As Michal Smith wrote, "in moral practice we attempt to change people's moral beliefs by engaging them in rational argument," see Michael Smith, "Realism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 408.

[16] Analogical to Hume's understanding of the matters of tase (see note 23).

[17] Some consider it one of the characteristic features of the human life *qua* social life. The relevance of pluralism (associated with the prevalence of conflicting views, preferences and interests within any given society) is frequently emphasized political philosophy – as the other prominent branch of practical philosophy being the conceptual next of kin to ethics – and appears in the works of Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, John Rawles, Jürgen Habermas, or Hannah Arendt, to name a few. For Arendt, the manifestations of value pluralism meant an inherent feature of social life, i.e. existing in any human community and representing the basis of *political* life, especially with regard to a democratic regime in a *polis*. A similar observation, albeit merely as a descriptive remark regarding the reality of social life, is mentioned also by Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 35-37.

Moral judgements are often thought to entail universal relevance,[18] meaning that moral judgment of person A applies to oneself as well as other people, and person A judges (morally) their acts and views based on what he or she considers morally true, not with regard to the beliefs and convictions maintained by the others. Bernard Williams wrote that, in spite of certain level of partiality such as loyalties to one's family and friends, which stems from people's social relations and environment, "there are some ethical demands that seem to be satisfied only by a *universal concern*, one that extends to all human beings and perhaps beyond the human race. This concern is particularly cultivated by the subsystem morality, to the extent that it is often thought that *no concern is truly moral unless it is marked by this universality*. For *morality,* the ethical constituency is always the same: *the universal constituency*."[19]

Such a 'universal concern', as Williams put it, seems to be a prominent aspect of many moral claims and theories. Suppose, however, that people want to appeal to something that might be applicable to everyone, something that seems to be a human universal. There certainly are some generally appreciated behaviours and practices, for instance, prosocial attitudes such as cooperation, reciprocity, and altruism, which might be considered desirable intrinsically or instrumentally, regardless of it being associated with morality. One may think that these attitudes are beneficial for him and people who matter to him, or that they simply constitute law-like rules and should bear on all members of a particular society. But this line of reasoning still needs to be applied to particular cases and questions (for example, whether the wealthier members of a society are always morally obliged to share a significant part of their wealth with the poorer ones), and if people's moral judgements involve a claim to universal relevance, there is a good chance that they will eventually disagree (1) with someone from the same social group, either about particular issue, or about the universality of such claims in general, or (2) with someone from another social group, or a person with a different worldview or cultural background.

The presumed universal appeal of moral claims is noticeable in individual moral judgements, which often seem to be stated as matters of fact, being formulated in objective rather than subjective terms. Hence, rather than "A considers X morally wrong", people tend to say that "X *is* morally wrong", which many take to imply that it is applicable not only to person A (i.e. "A ought not to do X", or "A ought not

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[18] Smith asserts that "the *objectivity* and *practicality* of moral judgement" is a characteristic feature of moral practice, see Smith, "Realism," 399-400.

[19] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 14 (emphasis added).

have done X"), but also for other people, as it applies universally.[20] In certain sense, many moral claims, though deriving from evaluative judgements, appear to casually convey objective meaning, and as such, they appear to be more akin to factual statements and beliefs discussed above. If this is the case, the presence of widespread moral disagreement seems to challenge this notion of objective morality, as well as to several prominent philosophical accounts of morality, commonly labelled as moral realism,[21] and forms the basis of arguments aimed to undermine the main tenets of a number of ethical theories associated with the notion of moral objectivity or universality.

Disagreement appears to be a widespread phenomenon, and its occurrence is not limited only to moral questions. It might arise in most, if not all, areas involving human interaction, including various fields of study. What makes moral disagreement a matter of potential concern, however, is its prevalence and persistence, and it seems to call into question some of the prominent concepts pertinent to moral *and* philosophical inquiry, most notably the notion of objective moral truths,[22] justification of moral knowledge and normative implications in the face of divergent moral views, cultural pluralism and persistent interpersonal disagreement.

Even so, there are persistent disagreements in other branches of philosophy, as well as other fields of inquiry. Why should we think that moral disagreement is somehow extraordinary and particularly concerning, unlike other disagreements about non-moral issues? After all, long-standing disagreements among scientists, for example, do not typically prompt people to question our overall capacity for knowledge of natural facts and relevance of scientific discovery. As we will see in Chapter 3, some moral philosophers appeal to these considerations, arguing that the actual role of moral disagreement in inspiring profoundly sceptical views is largely overstated. But then, why should moral disagreement be viewed as peculiar or perplexing?

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[20] See, for example, Richard M. Hare, "Universal Prescriptivism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991): 451-463.

[21] This is a very rough outline of moral realism, but it is informative with regard to the sense in which the term is often used. I consider it sufficient for the purposes of this introduction, but in general it would turn out needlessly reductive. Since there are various forms of moral realism, some of which do not match this rough characterization, and I will address them later in this chapter.

[22] See Mackie, *Ethics*, 35-36. This point is commonly associated with the arguments against moral objectivism presented by John Mackie, although the empirical observation of disagreement and the question of relativism have been around since the ancient Greek philosophy when it was addressed by some of the prominent thinkers such as Protagoras or Plato, and it continually reappeared throughout the Western tradition.

One possible answer is that it is because morality is *practical* and *social* domain, moral disagreement pertains to attitudes and reactions which do not seem to be involved in scientific or ordinary factual disputes. When people find themselves in persistent disagreement about a particular moral issue, both parties being steadfast that they are right, while no resolution is at hand, it seems that there is more at stake than merely concluding that the opponent is wrong in terms of having incorrect beliefs. Some people might conclude that their opponent is also irrational, but more importantly, they might consider the other also immoral. People might attribute moral badness or wrongness to their opponent's actions or beliefs, but also extending it to his or her character, condemning them as a morally corrupt person.

These reactions are manifested not only semantically – calling the opponents immoral, evil, malevolent and so on – but more importantly, in the emotional reactions which are associated with our moral judgments. Such emotional responses and reactive attitudes, commonly involving (righteous) anger, disgust, blame, do not equate to emotions such as frustration due to presumed irrationality of the others, which people may occasionally experience when facing other types of disagreement, such as disagreement about matters of taste or scientific theories. Yet, moral judgements are associated with the conviction that transgressions deserve blame, punishment or strong condemnation, which rarely happens in case of factual or scientific disagreements.[23]

NORMATIVE MORAL DISAGREEMENT

It is worth noting that moral disagreement actually refers to multiple issues, some of which are bundled together. Nevertheless, the problem of disagreement about moral questions has two distinct aspects: *normative* disagreement, which involves conflicting moral claims and disputes as to what ought to be done or what is the moral status of certain acts or entities (including people's character), and *metaethical* disagreement, which concerns conflicting metaethical theories and explanatory accounts of the nature of moral thought, moral language, and moral facts. Normative disagreements might involve particular issues, but also polemics concerning various normative theories, which sometimes provide background to the

[23] For a discussion on the observation that in the eyes of the others, mistaken non-moral beliefs (or non-moral ignorance) can often exculpate, whereas false moral beliefs do not, see Elizabeth Harman, "Does moral ignorance exculpate?," *Ratio* 24, no. 4 (2011): 452–460, and Alicia Kissinger-Knox, Patrick Aragon, and Moti Mizrahi, "Does Non-Moral Ignorance Exculpate? Situational Awareness and Attributions of Blame and Forgiveness," *Acta Analytica* 33 (2018): 161-179.

views people maintain and arguments in their support. Laypeople may appeal to the principles associated with particular normative theory even inadvertently, seeking the best strategy to endorse their view or explain their line of reasoning.

While a layperson can easily encounter normative disagreement on a daily basis, metaethical disagreement seems to be pertinent mainly, if not exclusively, to philosophical inquiry. One could say that the first involves practical reasoning, while the latter pertains to the theoretical one, and some philosophers argue that it is analogous to any other philosophical disagreement,[24] or even akin to scientific disagreements concerning competing theories. Yet, the issue is more complex than that, as normative and metaethical inquiry are often interwoven,[25] at least to some degree.

People who find themselves in a normative dispute over some moral issue tend to appeal to their moral intuitions, i.e. intuitions concerning what is right and wrong. If there is a conflict between the moral intuitions which are crucial to their respective arguments, it seems that they cannot help but wonder if them and their opponents share the same general notion of morality, or if they are purposefully defending immoral attitudes, or if they are simply being irrational. They may also wonder if their moral intuitions are right, how to confirm their veracity, and how to justify them in a disagreement with someone who seems to rely on somewhat different intuitions.

These questions clearly pertain to metaethical inquiry, and it could be argued that there is an overlap between the normative and metaethical kind of disagreement. Normative views might define one's metaethical framework, just as much as metaethical views may inform or influence one's approach to particular normative questions.[26] When laypeople disagree about controversial moral questions or the permissibility of certain acts, and their stance on a particular issue often discloses – even unknowingly – potential metaethical underpinnings of their normative views. There are examples of behaviours such as

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[24] See David Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," *The Journal of Ethics* 13 (2009): 47-4. As Enoch notes, "Disagreement is widespread not just in morality, but also about morality, in metaethics, and indeed in philosophy in general." This point is supposed to highlight an important distinction between first-order moral disagreements and disagreements *about* morality, especially with regard to metaethical arguments based on normative disagreements.

[25] The overlap of the two domains, i.e. the normative and the metaethical, especially with regard to metaethical positions extending to the normative domain, is also referred to as the domain of *metanormativity*. See Mark van Roojen, *Metaethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 279-281; and Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 40.

[26] Consider examples such as Divine Command Theory, a view which holds that (moral) rightness is determined by God's will. For people adhering to such a view is true that their religious beliefs overlap with their metaethical views and determine the content of particular normative beliefs. The claim "Thou shalt not kill!" is considered moral rule precisely because God commanded so. For a discussion, see van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 281-2.

being truthful, keeping one's promises, or not harming other people for fun, which are typically regarded not only as morally permissible, but even desirable, or outright required. Two people may agree that, generally speaking, acting in accordance with these principles is morally right. But they may disagree about of the applicability of these principles in particular circumstances. Some people may argue that a moral principle is universally true, and as such it applies to everyone and under any circumstances, while other people may disagree with this, claiming that the moral status of these attitudes is at least sometimes subject to other considerations and it may well depend on some other factors, for instance, on the positive or negative consequences of acting in such a manner, or even that these principles are arbitrary and their applicability differs in particular contexts, situations, or social groups.

This case of a disagreement illustrates not the popular distinction between two popular approaches in normative ethics, namely deontology and consequentialism, but it also suggests that the proponents of these views may share some metaethical notions about the nature of morality such as that it involves beliefs referring to some shared epistemic reality and that moral principles are universal (in the first two examples) or relative to other factors and conditions. The first two views demonstrate a disagreement about the content of universal normative principles – in this case, the disagreement concerns the question whether moral evaluations should be derived from the expected outcomes of some course of action – while the third view apparently suggests a relativistic outlook on ethics.

Some disputes also seem to be easier to solve than other ones. Suppose that two people disagree, but they both endorse a particular normative theory such as the utilitarianism and their disagreement is mostly based on the expected outcomes of some course of action. However, they both agree in principle, as they consider morally right the action which can bring about the highest overall utility (e.g. happiness, well-being, minimize suffering etc.). This disagreement is merely superficial, as the two parties need to find out which of the two alternatives would be more beneficial or have better effects regarding overall human happiness, hence, the dispute is likely to be resolved by obtaining the necessary empirical facts.

Moral disagreements are in this sense more complex,[27] bringing about a number of phenomenological experiences which make people personally and emotional more invested in the argument. This investment may paradoxically cause that the debate ends up in the deadlock, as both sides dig in their heels and

[27] For an overview of the most relevant research on this subject, especially the recent developments in empirical studies on moral disagreement and moral judgement, see Haidt, "The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology," *Science* 316, no. 5827 (2007): 998-1002, or Joshua D. Greene, "The Rise of Moral Cognition," *Cognition* 135 (2015): 39-42.

stubbornly defend their position, refusing to yield or consider their opponent's arguments from a more impartial position. It is possible that some of the other types of disagreement may induce such a situation, but it does not seem to be very common and does not appear to be as widespread or as polarizing as the subjects of moral disagreements[28] (and their political offshoots, which are based on nearly the same mechanism and usually involve an underlying moral issue that sustains their controversiality),[29] let alone differences in intercultural and historical differences.

The arguments against moral objectivity typically assert that the empirical fact of a deep, long-lasting disagreement about moral values – as well as radical disagreement among professional philosophers about its nature – undermines the common, intuitive conceptions of morality as representing objective or universalizable claims and principles. It may be the case that people are talking past one another because each of them has a different idea of what morality consists in. Perhaps most people have some vague notion of what morality is and what "moral rightness" means, but they struggle with finding a clear and unequivocally accepted definition which would help to clarify their positions, improve their line of reasoning and elucidate which empirical evidence they would need to settle their disagreements.

But maybe there is no decisive empirical evidence available yet, or there are no further relevant facts to be discovered – and even if they were, maybe some of the disputants would still refuse to change their mind. Nevertheless, one could still believe that having all the relevant moral facts, i.e. the facts about moral properties determining the rightness and wrongness of certain acts, as well as our obligations and restrictions, and acquiring clear and distinct understanding of the subject matter of ethics would break the deadlock and lead to resolving any persisting disagreements. Yet, this seems unlikely, considering the long history of moral thought, during which numerous attempts at establishing a foundation of universal moral understanding – a comprehensive, reliable and generally accepted method of gaining moral knowledge applicable for all humankind – were made, but all these efforts have apparently failed to achieve this goal.

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[28] Moral philosophers are not excluded from this observation, especially when it comes to the topics associated with normative or applied ethics. See for example Jonathan M. Weinberg, Chad Gonnerman, Cameron Buckner, and Joshua Alexander, "Are philosophers expert intuiters?," *Philosophical Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2010): 331-355, or Joachim Horvath and Alex Wiegmann, "Intuitive Expertise in Moral Judgments," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 100, no. 2 (2022): 342-359.

[29] For a discussion on the question of separating moral and political issues, see Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 244-260.

Brilliant minds in the Western and Eastern philosophical traditions produced numerous moral theories, including very sophisticated and logically well-founded ones, which have nonetheless been unsuccessful in bringing people together, bridging the gap between different cultures and schools of thought, and providing a unifying account of moral knowledge as a solid, reliable ground of moral inquiry and an effective method for settling deep disagreements among people. Ironically, it seems that instead of resolving the issue, the abundance of moral theories and their increasing complexity contributed to perpetuating moral disagreement and further deepened the divide between the proponents of incompatible moral views, normative systems, and metaethical positions.

Metaethics and Moral disagreement

To follow up on the distinction between two aspects of moral disagreement, namely, the normative and the metaethical one, we should consider in more detail what *metaethical* disagreement actually encompasses. As might be expected, the term refers to competing metaethical theories such as moral realism and anti-realism, or cognitivism and non-cognitivism, and any disagreements pertaining to the differences in the views they hold in general. But it might also involve disagreement over particular subject matter, for example, over the phenomenon of moral disagreement, an explanation of its causes and potential solution to the challenges it poses. And it might also involve disagreement over potential implications for philosophical moral inquiry, especially with regard to pertinent metaethical questions, such as epistemological issues of justification of moral knowledge, the metaphysical status of moral properties, and the reliability or effectiveness of common methods of moral inquiry. Furthermore, recently it has also covered the questions of relevance of empirical sciences for the field of metaethics.[30]

Moral disagreements – regardless of whether they concern particular normative views, methods of justification, origins of morality or the existence and nature of moral facts – often indicate or reflect certain metaethical assumptions, i.e. the assumptions about the nature of morality. The purpose of the following section is to outline the main metaethical positions, as they often feature in contemporary philosophical

[30] Although this question is also relevant to other fields of philosophy, and - alongside questions concerning methods of philosophical inquiry – has also gained attention in the field of *metaphilosophy*. For recent discussions of this topic, see Marc Andree Weber, "Armchair Disagreement," *Metaphilosophy* 48, no. 4 (2017): 527-9; Joshua Knobe, Wesley Buckwalter, Shaun Nichols, Philip Robbins, Hagop Sarkissian, and Tamler Sommers. "Experimental philosophy," *Annual review of psychology* 63 (2012): 81-99; Richard Joyce, "Metaethics and the Empirical sciences," *Philosophical Explorations* 9, no. 1 (2006): 133-148.

debates on the nature of moral disagreement. Some of them have already been mentioned, but we need a more elaborate account of these theoretical positions to fully appreciate exactly in which way does the occurrence of moral disagreement threaten them or further the arguments of their rivals. Such an outline of the major theories will clarify some of the technical terminology and provide a more detailed, albeit not exhaustive, exposition of the variety of positions that professional moral philosophers adopt with regard to this subject, which will form the basis for further examination of the key arguments and explanatory accounts of moral disagreement in the subsequent chapters.

THE SUBJECT MATTER: COGNITIVIST BELIEFS OR NON-COGNITIVIST ATTITUDES?

What do people actually disagree about when they engage in disputes concerning conflicting moral claims? The issue of moral disagreement has played a prominent role in metaethical discussions over the past several decades, generating a number of arguments, as well as various explanatory accounts of its pertinence. It may be the case that moral disagreement is so intractable because the truth of moral claims is relative to one's moral standpoint. Some would argue that this is true, provided that one maintains a coherent moral standpoint. A particular moral judgement or a set of beliefs is considered epistemically justified, as long as they are consistent with the other beliefs one holds to be true, all together fitting in an internally coherent system of beliefs.[31] On the other hand, some consider moral disagreement irresolvable because in their view, moral claims are, strictly speaking, neither true nor false, as they simply express approving or disapproving attitudes of the speakers, and the subjects of moral disagreement are not factual matters but matters of taste.

Some philosophers attempted to explain the specific nature of moral disagreement in terms of the aforementioned difference between matters of fact and matters of taste, or rather elaborating on it. Charles L. Stevenson[32] introduced a distinction between *disagreement in beliefs* and *disagreement in attitudes*,[33] arguably

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[31] Justin Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2017): 373. See also Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Coherentist epistemology and Moral theory," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137-189.

[32] Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944). Although some might say that Stevenson's classification is inspired by the older accounts of morality, nowadays referred to as 'moral sentimentalists' (or 'moral sense theorists'), notably David Hume. But there is an important difference, as classical moral sentimentalism used the notion of

one of the most prominent explanatory accounts of moral disagreement produced in the first half of the 20th century, significantly influencing modern metaethics. According to the Stevensonian approach, the first type, *disagreement in beliefs*, involved the matters of fact (or purported facts), being defined as a conflict of apparently incompatible beliefs, while the latter type concerned different *attitudes* towards a particular matter, attitudes that appeared opposing each other or involve incompatible appraisals,[34] resembling personal preferences masked as factual statements. Stevenson believed that approaching moral arguments in the same way as factual, non-moral claims was a mistake, as on their view, moral disagreements express *disagreement in attitude*. The notion of opposing 'attitudes' refers to individual expressions of *being for* or *against* something – which might involve personal desires, intentions, sentiments – that cannot be jointly satisfied or maintained.[35]

The question whether moral claims express beliefs or other states of mind plays a prominent role in contemporary debates in metaethics. Those who endorse the view known as *cognitivism* maintain that moral judgements are akin to non-moral beliefs[36] *insofar* as they are *representational* states of mind. The content of beliefs is representative in relation to reality, i.e. to the real world and its properties. As such, beliefs can be assessed as true or false (incorrect). On this view, moral beliefs are like any other non-moral beliefs, for example "Czechoslovakia is a state in central Europe." Just as this belief can be examined and revealed as factually incorrect (since the state of Czechoslovakia does not exist anymore), so too moral judgments like "Cheating is immoral!" can be subjected to examination and found true or false.

Non-cognitivism, on the other hand, rejects the thesis that moral claims express truth-apt beliefs. While the Stevensonian typology of disagreement has been criticized for not being comprehensive enough,

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sentiments ('attitudes') to explain possible agreement and universalizability of morals. Hence, even though Stevenson himself referred to Hume's ethics, he wanted to contrast his view of the differences in attitudes to explain moral disagreement, and he criticised Hume for considering it a basis for widespread moral agreement, along with Hume's assumption that disagreement in attitudes is rooted in disagreement in beliefs (Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, 273-276). See also Henning Jensen, "Hume on Moral Agreement," *Mind* 86, no. 344 (1977): 497-499.

[33] Everett W. Hall, "Stevenson on Disagreement in Attitude" *Ethics* 58, no. 1 (1947): 51-56, and Mike Ridge, "Disagreement" (2013): 41-2.

[34] Stevenson writes that "the former is concerned with how matters are truthfully to be described and explained; the latter is concerned with how they are to be favored or disfavored, and hence with how they are to be shaped by human efforts" (*Ethics and Language,* 4).

[35] In the context of metaethics, 'attitudes' are not to be confused with (cognitive or rationally developed) 'desires'.

[36] van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 294. A belief, as a representational state of mind, epitomizes what is understood by 'cognitive state' in this context. Non-cognitive mental state (also called 'conative state') refers to affective and motivating states of mind, which are not representative (in terms of representing the external reality).

besides other things for overlooking certain relevant kinds of disagreement,[37] the notion of disagreement in attitude has also inspired a number of prominent attempts at explaining moral disagreement and it remains an influential groundwork of various non-cognitivist views in metaethics, especially of the expressivist kind. The non-cognitivists, in line with Stevenson's theoretical framework, maintain that moral statements express other, non-cognitive states of mind.[38] Various forms of non-cognitivism have been developed, but one of the most prominent ones is *expressivism*. According to *expressivism*, moral language is employed to express non-cognitive attitudes which manifest one's liking, approval or preference, as well as disapproval or dislike of something. Moral judgements are to be understood as various preferential attitudes (e.g. expressing approval or disapproval of something, such as a situation or behaviour, possibly even in reference to future intentions). *Emotivism*,[39] a subcategory of expressivism, is a theory according to which these expressive attitudes correspond with the relevant affective states of mind of the speaker. are tantamount to emotion or affective mental states of the speaker.

Even though the debate between the cognitivists and non-cognitivists was originally about moral language, i.e. the meaning of various moral claims, it can be expanded to the general metaethical inquiry concerning the roots of prevailing moral disagreements. Not every moral philosopher falls neatly into one the two categories or explicitly states their allegiance to either of the two metaethical frameworks with respect to their stand on the question of moral disagreement, the view holding that particular normative theories generate moral claims which are true in the *robust* sense seem to entail a commitment to cognitivism. There is also a clear correlation[40] between cognitivism and non-sceptical moral realism, which holds that moral propositions aim to report facts, and at least some moral claims are, or can be, true in this sense.

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[37] Such as 'disagreement in (sensory) perception', or a lack of explanation as why beliefs and desires are different from other 'contentful' states of mind. See Ridge, "Disagreement," 45-6.

[38] Sometimes referred to as '*conative*' mental states. These non-cognitive states of mind are typically considered to consist in *affective* or similar mental states. They are not 'cognitive' only in the sense of not being representational, although they are obviously a part of human cognitive processes. Other disciplines, especially psychology, employs alternative terms such as 'implicit cognition', 'subconscious' or 'intuitive' processing. This terminology is in my opinion preferable to the traditional philosophical names, as it conveys the essential distinctions in an informative, unambiguous manner, avoiding potentially unhelpful connotations associated with the labelling of some mental states as 'non-cognitive'.

[39] Apart from C. L. Stevenson, the main outline of emotivism as a metaethical theory is commonly thought to be formulated in the works of A. J. Ayer. See, for example, Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 103-106.

[40] It is merely a correlation, as some metaethical positions, such as quasi-realism, might reject cognitivism. The Error Theorists (sometimes inaccurately described moral nihilism) are cognitivists. And some non-cognitivists theories such as Hume's sentimentalism or more recently Gibbard's projectivism, might be construed as specific versions of realism.

At the same time, folk moral judgements occasionally seem to evoke some form of basic relativism with regard to particular areas of moral inquiry or specific normative views (a common example of this is cultural relativism[41]). This illustrates my earlier comment that normative moral inquiry, if only implicitly, is commonly interwoven with certain metaethical assumptions, and so is normative moral disagreements among laypeople in general. It seems incoherent, for example, that a person subscribing to moral scepticism would simultaneously be a staunch defender of deontological ethics,[42] or that an advocate of divine command theory would denounce moral realism.

MORAL REALITY AND OBJECTIVITY

Moral realism is commonly described as a metaethical view maintaining that moral judgements and beliefs are comparable to other non-moral beliefs, and moral statements report the facts about the world. Many realists also cognitivists, holding that moral claims and beliefs are truth-apt, i.e. they express true or false propositions.[43] This is a very rough definition of moral realism, as there are many distinct varieties of theoretical approaches that are identified as some form of moral realism.[44] However, they generally share the thesis that moral beliefs and judgements do in some way represent the reality, and refer to properties determining their content in such way that it can be qualified as true (correct) or false (incorrect).[45]

A traditionally prominent version of moral realism, known as *robust* or *substantive* moral realism, is committed to more detailed characterization of moral properties, typically asserting that moral properties

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[41] Rachels outlines the core idea of cultural relativism as a denial of people having a culture-independent standard of right and wrong by which they may be judged. "Different cultures have different moral codes […] every standard is culture-bound," see James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1986), 2.

[42] Although it is not impossible, as there is a difference between *metaethical* scepticism and scepticism about any *normative* claims. It should be noted that scepticism about moral realism or moral objectivity *does not* entail general normative scepticism or value nihilism, as some moral realists (Derek Parfit in *On What Matters*, for example) appear to claim, appealing to an *indispensable* role of realism in moral deliberation and for the purposes of practical reasoning in general (as David Enoch does). There is no reason why a metaethical sceptic or antirealist could not conceive of normativity in some other way, for example, by adopting some form of moral fictionalism or relying on an alternative conception of values. See van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 5, Shaun Nichols, "After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment," *Philosophical Psychology* 17, no. 1 (2004): 3-26, or Andrew Huddleston, "Nietzsche's Meta-Axiology: Against the Sceptical Readings." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2014): 322-342. For a pertinent discussion regarding the question as what bearings sceptical philosophical views (scepticism about moral responsibility in case of this particular paper) might have, or *should* have, on everyday lives of their proponents, see Shaun Nichols, "After Incompatibilism: A Naturalistic Defense of the Reactive Attitudes," *Philosophical Perspectives* 21 (2007): 405-428

[43] Stephen Finlay, "Four faces of moral realism," *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 6 (2007): 820–849.

[44] See van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 290-1, as well as Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism is Moral Realism." *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 4 (2015): 855-863. Cf. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 15-16.

[45] van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 14.

are not only factual (corresponding with the reality), but also objective, response-independent, and/or fundamental, i.e. their existence and truth value is not contingent on any additional variables. This can be contrasted with *minimal* moral realism, which refers to the realist theories that do not postulate or require further commitments about the metaphysical nature of moral properties.[46]

Due to its historical prominence, robust moral realism is sometimes referred to simply as "moral realism". But this, I believe, is potentially confusing, for minimal realism is still realism, although of a distinct kind, and as such, it is possibly vulnerable to some of the challenges that robust moral realism faces. Because robust moral realism conceptualizes the objectivity of moral truth as the existence[47] of stance-independent moral facts, it is also known as *moral objectivism*[48] to denote this kind of moral realism. The *stance-independent* status means that truth of moral facts does not depend on the evaluative attitudes of any individual or group, real or hypothetical.[49] Hence, the objective nature of morality consists in stance-independent moral facts, which are accessible to human mind. Michael Smith called this view the "objectivity of moral judgment". As Smith puts it, moral judgement expresses "subject's beliefs about an objective matter of fact",[50] but actual metaphysical status of these factual matters is irrelevant, as moral facts are conceptualized on the basis of objective reasons. Similarly, Stephen Darwall notes that moral thought and feeling have 'objective purport', explaining this as "Seeming to be of something objective and

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[46] Minimal realism, on the other hand, is a type of moral realism, which it is not committed to the notion of objective, stance-independent moral facts, but it can still maintain that there are true answers to moral questions. See and van Roojen, 14, 35. Rosen defines minimal realism simply as the denial of noncognitivism and scepticism (the *error theory*), see Gideon Rosen, "Objectivity and modern idealism: What is the question?," in *Philosophy in mind: The place of philosophy in the study of mind*, 277-319. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1994), 278-80.

[47] For a helpful discussion on conceptual issues related to the common usage of the words 'objectivity' and 'reality', see Billy Dunaway, "Realism and Objectivity", in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, ed. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 135-150. Dunaway's contribution is especially helpful as since in contemporary debates, these concepts are often used somewhat loosely, as is the case with moral philosophy, and his intention is to review and reformulate them to provide clear-cut definitions to complement rigorous philosophical analyses.

[48] See Geoffrey P., Goodwin and John M. Darley. "The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism." *Cognition* 106 (2008): 1341, or Shaun Nichols "After Objectivity," 5-6: "To claim that an action is *objectively* immoral is to claim that the action is wrong "as it is in itself" and not in relation to subjects […]. According to the objectivist, if a particular action is morally wrong, then it is wrong *simpliciter*."

[49] For this reason, some philosophers, notably Shafer-Landau or Derek Parfit, consider the 'constructivist' views to be a form of moral anti-realism. See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1, 65 (note that Parfit refers to the rationalist type of constructivism as to 'subjectivism about reason') and Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 14, writing that "[c]onstructivists endorse the reality of a domain, but explain this by invoking a constructive function out of which the reality is created. This function has moral reality as its output. ... What is common to all constructivists is the idea that moral reality is constituted by the attitudes, actions, responses, or outlooks of persons, possibly under idealized circumstances."

[50] Michael Smith, "In Defense of "The Moral Problem": A Reply to Brink, Copp, and Sayre-McCord," *Ethics* 108, no. 1 (October 1997): 85. See also Richard Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe it," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 87–139.

independent of the perceiver (e.g. some objective fact or an objective property of some substance)".[51] On these views, moral objectivity is construed with regard to objective reasons, meaning that the correct moral facts depend on the appraisers, i.e. the judging agents.[52]

Drawing on these distinctions, we can consider the significance of moral disagreement for various types of moral realism. Although the existence of widespread moral disagreement might be considered to pose some challenge to any kind of non-sceptical metaethical theory, it is considered to be particularly threating to the moral realist theories holding that there are stance-independent moral facts. However, I believe that it also undermines the views conceptualizing moral facts with regard to the notion of universal rationality, appealing to normative truths, which not appraiser-independent, albeit not in the metaphysical sense. Moral *universalism* is a view holding that moral principles and judgements apply universally, i.e. that there is a single true morality, which can be construed as 'objective' with respect to a particular criterion of moral truth (for example, in reference to objective reasons or universal features of human nature). As such, it might refer to a different kind of 'moral objectivity' than moral *objectivism*, which holds that moral propositions are true or false objectively, and their truth is independent of individual evaluations, reasons or beliefs. Both of these types of moral realism differ from moral *relativism*, a view that that moral propositions are true or false relatively, i.e. in relation to a particular moral frame[53] in which they are set and evaluated or being relative to moral agents or appraisers.

It is noteworthy that moral relativism as a metaethical theory can be understood as a species of minimal moral realism[54] insofar as it maintains that the single defining criterion of moral truth or the nature

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[51] Stephen Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 239.

[52] For this reason, these theories are also sometimes identified as being 'subjectivist', which seems confusing. But their subjectivism is only about their judgments (i.e. the way of determining what is right and wrong), while they still maintain that these judgements have 'objective purport', or that normative reasons are objective. Moral facts are conceptualized as facts about normative reasons. Smith explains it in the following way: "They are objective in the sense that, via a conversational process involving rational reflection and argument, we are each able to come up with an answer to the question, What do we have normative reason to do if we are in such and such circumstances? and our answers to this question, provided we have each reflected properly, will all be one and the same." (Smith, "In Defense of "The Moral Problem"," 88).

[53] Gilbert Harman, "Moral relativism defended," *The Philosophical Review* 84, no. 1 (1975): 3-22.

[54] This classification is based on Mark van Roojen's *Metaethics*, 14. He describes *minimal realism* as the view that moral claims and beliefs are about the world in the same way that non-moral terms represent everyday properties (making moral properties such as "right" and "wrong" analogical to non-moral terms, for instance, "red", "clear", "useful", "defective", to label real properties of the world). Furthermore, the minimal realism maintains that moral beliefs and sentences at least sometimes correctly represent that reality.

of 'moral reality'[55] (being true for every person or situation) is that it is relative, namely, that moral truth is contingent upon a particular framework of judgement such as social context or intersubjective[56] reasons. Nonetheless, this classification of relativism is not widely accepted, and for the purposes of this paper, to prevent unnecessary confusion based on conflation of the terms, I use moral realism the sense excluding moral relativism.

I will refer to the positions postulating stance-independent moral facts simply as *moral realism* from now on, but I concede that there are forms of realism are not committed to these views, typically naturalistic moral realism. Nevertheless, in what follows, I will focus on the problems that persistent moral disagreement poses to moral realism in the sense outlined above.

According to van Roojen, the *minimalist* component of this realism means that such theories do not need to extend beyond this or make further commitments regard the metaphysical nature of these properties. Having introduced this definition of *minimal moral realism*, he hastens to add that it is likely that only few metaethicists would call it a genuinely realist position, particularly in some cases (such as moral relativism), despite them falling into van Roojen's category of minimal realism (van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 4-5, 14).

[55] Harman, "Moral relativism is Moral Realism," 855-858.

[56] In this way, it differs from general *subjectivism*, which includes solely individual judgements, desires and reasons.

II. THE CHALLENGE OF DISAGREEMENT

In what way might moral disagreement present a challenge for moral philosophy? Besides its practical consequences discussed in the previous chapter, it is commonly understood to challenge metaethical moral realism. Three challenges are commonly recognized in the context of the phenomenon of moral disagreement: *the metaphysical challenge*, which is associated with the *error theory*[57] in metaethics, a view sometimes described as *moral nihilism* by its critics.[58] It should be noted, however, that the general structure of the so-called arguments from disagreement is compatible with a couple of other antirealist positions, including non-cognitivist or relativist theories. The error theory invokes such arguments to support the claim that we do not have any reason to believe in the existence of stance-independent moral facts. Many argue, however, that this does not mean that we can rule out or deny their existence, perhaps only accept that there is a reasonable doubt about their existence. The second type of challenge is *epistemological*, as moral disagreement might give rise to scepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge or its justification.

Finally, some philosophers pointed out that moral disagreement might also entail a *semantic challenge* for moral realism. It focuses on the problem of indeterminacy and ambiguous use of moral terms, which emerge throughout moral discourse. Justin Horn explains that main issue lies in the notion that "the character of many moral disagreements gives us reason to suspect that not all competent moral speakers pick out the same properties as one another when they use moral terms. If this is so, both sides of a moral

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[57] The *error theory* is a cognitivist view maintaining that people's moral judgements are always erroneous. The reason why moral beliefs and assertions are never true is because the properties that would make them true (i.e. moral properties such as "rightness" or "goodness" in the moral sense) do not exist, or at least are not instantiated. This view is advocated for example by Richard Joyce, "Morality: The Evolution of a Myth," in *Essays in Moral Skepticism,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1, or *The Myth of Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5-9, 16-20.

[58] See van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 71, or Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 327, 448-9. Parfit also argues that moral naturalism and some forms of non-cognitivism are close to moral nihilism; see 368, 383-4 in the same volume, and charges Bernard Williams with defending a particular form of moral nihilism (*On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 442). His notion of nihilism is somewhat briefly outlined in the first volume of *On What Matters*, where he claims that nihilists "deny that we have any reasons" (*On What Matters* Vol. 1, 82). Parfit's use of the term 'nihilism' is in some way peculiar, and it is worth noting difference between 'moral nihilism' and 'value nihilism' – for this distinction, see, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 1 (2), 8, 113 (D), 617, or Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946).

dispute may speak truly, and the standard realist diagnosis of such disputes - that at most one party can be correct - is mistaken."[59]

The semantic challenge *prima facie* is tied to the cognitivist-noncognitivist debate that we explored earlier. If non-cognitivist analysis of moral disagreement is true, people do not disagree over beliefs but over something else (such as over their attitudes or affective states and reactions), which is not truth-apt in the same way as the representative states of mind like the ordinary beliefs about the factual properties of the world. However, the semantic challenge should not be reduced only to the non-cognitivist perspective. Even if moral judgements are construed as ordinary non-moral beliefs, it is still possible to raise doubts over the question whether people use moral terms in the same way, i.e. referring to the same objects, properties or concepts. Consider the terms like "moral rightness", "goodness", "justice", "virtue", "evil", "duty", or "moral acceptability", or "the greater good". Can we fairly reasonably believe that it is true that people – who ordinarily use these terms when discussing moral matters – do refer to the same properties and concepts? The history of moral philosophy suggests otherwise, as these concepts have been reevaluated and reconceptualized by various philosophers since the ancient times, as is perhaps best illustrated by Plato's *Republic*. But even in ordinary moral discourse we can doubt whether people really disagree with each other over the same things. Since moral judgements are mental phenomena, they are empirically underdetermined and the task to confirm whether people use moral terms in reference to the same properties – or whether they can modify the understanding of moral terms in the way that would help to resolve moral disagreement – is notoriously difficult. Thus, the semantic challenge for moral realism follows.

In the following section, I will focus primarily on the metaphysical and epistemological challenge. However, It is worth noting that the epistemic and semantic challenges both pertain to moral universalism[60] just as much as to moral *objectivism*. While scepticism about moral truth and knowledge often draws on arguments concerning moral language or metaphysics, scepticism about justified moral belief does not need to deal with metaphysical commitments of moral inquiry, as it simply questions the possibility of justification, as well as the relevance of suggested methods of justification. Because moral

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[59] Justin Horn, "Does Moral Disagreement Pose a Semantic Challenge to Moral Realism?," *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1059-1060.
[60] Strictly speaking, they apply to any kind of cognitivist or realist views on morality. But for the views like subjectivism or relativism, it is arguably easier to respond to these challenges. Nonetheless, this does not excuse them from addressing the problem of disagreement.

universalism is committed to the view that moral claims are universally applicable, it is also exposed to the objections based on the justification scepticism, since one may ask about the possibility of universally justified moral beliefs in the face of widespread moral disagreement.

The Argument from Disagreement

The arguments against moral realism appealing to the phenomenon of disagreement are commonly known as the *arguments from disagreement*, and while there are multiple versions of such arguments, they usually elaborate on what is known as the *standard argument from disagreement*,[61] originally put forward by John Mackie as the argument from relativity against moral objectivism. Since then, the question of disagreement has received a lot of attention in philosophical literature in relation to important debates and recent development in metaethics.

Mackie's argument challenges the idea of objective moral truths on the basis of widespread disagreement. Starting with the observation that disagreement about moral views and practices seems to be both prevalent and persistent, Mackie goes on to consider what is best explanation for this phenomenon. Remarking that disagreement about moral views and practices seems to be both prevalent and persistent, he wrote that "the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community."[62] Mackie sought to provide an elucidation of this phenomenon by the means of an *abductive* inference to the best explanation.[63] He considered two explanations of moral disagreement: according to moral realism, disagreement is caused by errors in people beliefs due to their differential access to a common subject matter, i.e. moral facts or a shared, objective morality. According to the anti-realist

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[61] Mackie's argument from relativity later become known as 'the argument from disagreement', although this term was coined only in later commentaries – for example, by David O. Brink, "Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984): 111-25, and William Tolhurst, "The Argument from Moral Disagreement," *Ethics* 97 (1987): 610-621.

[62] Mackie, *Ethics*, 36.

[63] The argument from relativity is based on the assumption that if there are two competing explanatory accounts of difference in moral beliefs, we can consider their explanatory virtues such as simplicity to determine which theory provides us with the best explanation. Differences in moral attitudes, Mackie argues, are better explained by different ways of life than by widespread shortcomings in detecting objective moral facts. There is a simplicity to this argument, which is supposed to count in its favour.

theories, existing moral disagreements can be explained without any commitment to moral metaphysics or a common subject matter, but simply as people approving of their ways of living, or the ways they would like to live.[64] In Mackie's view, the second explanation is better, as it does not require any additional metaphysical conjectures. If the second explanation is true, he claimed, then there are no objective moral facts and ordinary moral beliefs and sentences are false.

Although Mackie's claim is not deductive, hence not providing a decisive argument against the existence of objective moral facts, he maintained that it still poses a formidable threat to moral objectivism: "The argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they reflect perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values."[65] This argument employs the *inference to the best explanation* (IBE), also called *abduction* or 'the *method of elimination*'.[66] Mackie's argument is that the most plausible explanation of widespread disagreement and the apparent relativity of moral values is that people's moral beliefs do not represent actual moral facts, but rather originate in people's wishful thinking, which endorses people's preferred ways of life, expressing them as normative claims in reference to purportedly objective moral facts, which are nonetheless fictional and not true. The standard *argument from disagreement* can be formalized in the following way:

(1) "There is widespread moral disagreement between individuals and communities who make moral judgements.

(2) This disagreement might be explained by differential access to a common moral reality.

(3) This disagreement might instead be explained by people approving of their own actual ways of life due to wishful thinking.

(4) The latter explanation is better than the former because it doesn't require postulating anything over and above what we already accept.

(5) There are no other plausible explanations for the disagreement.

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[64] van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 21.
[65] Mackie, *Ethics*, 37.
[66] Gilbert Harman, "The Inference to the Best Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 88-90.

Conclusion: We should accept the explanation offered by the premise number 3 rather than that number 2, as it explains the problem in question in a simpler and more efficient way with a greater, or equally strong explanatory power."[67]

At the heart of this argument lies a fairly simple, yet poignant question: why should people presume that there is anything like a shared, objective 'moral reality'? Is the notion of objective morality taken to somehow imply its existence being self-evident,[68] or is it more likely to be a myth, a misbelief or a fabrication of the human mind with no basis in the real world? After all, even if it some objective moral facts existed, how would we find a reliable way of discovering them, given the fact of the extensive disagreement among people about these facts and their content? Although the implications of Mackie's argument have been questioned, particularly with regard to its bearing on the *metaphysical* status of stance-independent moral facts,[69] it compelled moral theorist to address the problematic nature of apparently intractable disagreement about moral issues.

Cultural Diversity and Descriptive Moral Plurality

Metaethics is often characterized by its descriptive approach to the study of its subject matter, and its aims or methods differentiate it from other domains concerned with the study of morality, such as normative ethics or empirical sciences.[70] Yet, in analysing particular features of moral discourse and moral thought, metaethicists often rely on own observations or intuitions, which they use as premises in their arguments, even though in some cases their observations are called into question as merely unsubstantiated claims or assumptions. This issue is particularly sensitive if it involves an appeal to specific empirical phenomena as a basis for subsequent philosophical examination.

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[67] This summary is based on the summary of Mackie's argument by van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 22.
[68] It is worth mentioning the apparent resemblance of this approach to the modern arguments against the existence of God, or rather the debunking of the classic arguments for the existence of God, which have been around since the Enlightenment in direct rejection the so-called *ontological argument* for God's existence produced by scholastic philosophy (being formulated, for example, by Anselm of Canterbury and René Descartes).
[69] See, for example, Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," 368-370.
[70] See, for example, Joyce, "Metaethics and Empirical sciences," 133-4.

Consider Mackie's claim about the widespread disagreement in the world. Several critics of Mackie's argument pointed out that empirical veracity of such a claim is dubious, and there might be as much moral agreement as disagreement, or perhaps even more instances of moral agreement than those of disagreement.[71] If these assertions were true, the force of the argument from disagreement would be severely diminished. One of the potential problems is that a notion of widespread disagreement is quantitatively vague, leaving it open to interpretation. While we do not have an exact, unanimously accepted criteria of what it means for disagreement to be 'widespread', we can understand it in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e., existing or happening in many places or among many people, or qualify it in some way, for example, that it is "significant enough to be a matter of concern" for philosophers and non-philosophers. To see if this might be the case, we should consider the empirical data pertinent to Mackie's original claim and see whether they, at least *prima facie*, support his argument or contradict it.

One of the key questions in contemporary debates on the nature of moral disagreement is whether actual differences in moral beliefs and practices are as widespread as the anti-realist arguments claim it to be. Empirical research into moral beliefs and attitudes of various cultures offers relevant findings which may illuminate the question of the extent of moral disagreement. Worldwide diversity in moral beliefs and practices has been scientifically probed and a large body of empirical evidence seems to support Mackie's observation of the phenomenon of moral disagreement. We can refer to a number of research studies in the field of sociology, anthropology and cross-cultural psychology, reporting notable differences in norms and moral attitudes between different cultures, but apparently also among members of the same cultural group.

These differences induce disagreements among people, and so the existence of disagreement about moral issues, is considered a sociological fact, as well as its general prevalence.[72] For example, Richard Brandt[73] conducted anthropological studies concerning apparent moral disagreement between typical Hopi and white American attitudes that could not plausibly be attributed to differences in belief about nonmoral

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[71] See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?", 29-31.

[72] For a comprehensive review of contemporary studies of cultural factors affecting moral judgments and variation in moral beliefs, see Jesse Graham, Peter Meindl, Erica Beall, Kate M. Johnson, and Li Zhang, "Cultural Differences in Moral Judgment and Behavior, Across and Within Societies," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 8 (2016): 125-130. Cf. Oliver Scott Curry, Daniel Austin Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse, "Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 1 (2019): 47-69.

[73] Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

facts. Similarly, empirical findings in social psychology and anthropology suggest that the domain of morality varies across cultures, and the evaluative processes related to moral matters are not universal, as people from different social groups exhibit differences in the perception and interpretation of morally relevant factors. Psychological theories also provide explanatory accounts as to why this is the case and what it means for our understanding of moral reasoning, arguing that social norms and culturally shaped virtues, as well as intuitive responses and emotional reactions substantially affect the process of moral judgement and associated attitudes.[74] Some of the studies extended their interest beyond the scope of moral reasoning, considering cross-cultural differences in the styles of reasoning in general,[75] while other studies pointed out that cultural context is not the only relevant criterion of potential intergroup differences, but other factors – such as differences between social classes within the same culture – might play a significant role in forming different moral judgements too.[76] A more comprehensive discussion of to the empirical studies of moral judgment will follow in Chapter 4, as it pertains to rival explanatory accounts of disagreement and its prevalence. Nevertheless, it seems that a brief survey of available empirical evidence concerning differences in moral thought and attitudes supports Mackie's initial that there is widespread moral disagreement among people, between different cultures as well as within them.

The Sceptical Challenge

There are other arguments against moral realism drawing on the problem of moral disagreement, many of which elaborate on the original version of Mackie's argument[77] and often used in combination with other antirealist arguments.[78] However, the existence of disagreement in itself does not show that

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[74] Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues." *Daedalus* 133, no. 4 (2004): 55-66. The paper argues that moral diversity is essentially a product of different enculturation and moral education. Note that the authors describe 'virtues' essentially as social skills.

[75] Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently… and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 44-45, 73-77, 86-90, 113-126. Nisbett draws on an impressive body of empirical research to formulate a comprehensive theory of culture-based differences between the East Asian and the Euro-American way of thinking and reasoning, including paying attention to different factors or motives in decision making.

[76] See Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Roller, and Maria G. Dias, "Affect, Culture, and Morality, or Is It Wrong to Eat your Dog?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 4 (1993): 613-628.

[77] For an overview of the arguments elaborating on Mackie's position, see Richard Joyce, "Arguments from Moral disagreement to Moral skepticism," in *Moral Skepticism: New Essays*, ed. Diego Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2018), 141-162.

[78] Prominent examples of such challenges include the so-called "evolutionary debunking" argument or the genealogical arguments against moral realism. See Katia Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism," *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 2 (2015): 104-116, or Kelby Mason, "Debunking arguments and the genealogy of religion and morality," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 9

there are no moral facts,[79] nor does it directly entail moral scepticism. Deductive arguments from moral disagreement are unable to rebuke the existence of mind-independent moral facts, so moral antirealists usually turn to inductive arguments and appeals to the best explanation. The argument from disagreement was presented as a challenge to *metaphysical* commitments of moral realism, aiming to refute the existence of stance-independent moral truths or facts. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between the *existence* of moral truth and the knowledge of it. One could argue that Mackie's argument does not support nihilism, but rather a rigorous kind of moral scepticism – a "hard scepticism" about moral truth or epistemic accessibility of stance-independent moral facts – shifting the focus from the metaphysics of moral properties to an epistemological challenge derived from widespread moral disagreement. Judging Mackie's argument solely on its merits, it seems more plausible to read it as an argument for scepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge. As Walter Sinnott-Armstrong writes, "insofar as Mackie's argument claims that there is no explanatory reason to believe in moral facts but also gives us no reason to believe that there are no moral facts, these considerations seem to make it reasonable to suspend belief, at least until we find a better argument. So Mackie's own argument leads not to his moral nihilism but instead to a suspension of belief about moral facts."[80]

On this reading, the phenomenon of moral disagreement gives rise to epistemological scepticism, as it involves an array of problems concerning epistemic accessibility of moral properties and justification of moral beliefs. The type of moral scepticism that Sinnott-Armstrong identifies in Mackie's argument can be described as *scepticism about moral truth*, for it accepts that moral beliefs are truth-apt (like ordinary non-moral beliefs) but doubts purported truth-value of moral beliefs, questioning if any moral belief can be known to be true or false and ultimately concluding that no substantive moral belief is ever true or false, or – as the stronger version of this claim – that all substantive moral beliefs are false.

(2010): 770– 78. For a general review of the types of moral-debunking arguments, see Daniel Z. Korman, "Debunking arguments in Metaethics and Metaphysics," in *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science*, ed. Alvin I. Goldman and Brian P. McLaughlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 337-363.

[79] Generally accepted facts, even if being a subject of widespread consensus or considered 'common knowledge', do not guarantee universal agreement. For example, we can encounter people who believe the Earth is flat or that the deathrate of Covid-19 is statistically lesser than of the common flu, although these empirical facts are It is likely that we will disagree with them, and our factual disagreement is predicated on the existence of such facts, or our assumption that the facts over which we disagree are true or false. It goes without saying that even if some facts are generally accepted or there is a universal agreement about them, it does not entail that they are true stance-independent facts.

[80] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40.

Generally speaking, scepticism in epistemology refers to views emphasising the limits of knowledge or justified belief. Moral scepticism can doubt either (1). the possibility of moral knowledge with regard to accessibility of moral facts, or (2). Adequate justification, i.e. the criteria of justified moral beliefs. These issues relate to the problem of disagreement, as it raises the question of interpersonal justification and a reliable way of discovering moral truths. Epistemological moral scepticism varies depending on the conceptualization of knowledge and the role of justified belief with respect to establishing true knowledge. Being sceptical about justified beliefs usually entails scepticism about knowledge, but the opposite is not necessarily true, as one might consider justified belief to be only one of the conditions constituting knowledge. As we have seen, some metaethical theories maintain that moral judgements are not truth-apt, but people might still be justified in holding them, although such an account needs to be based on different grounds than stance-independent facts.[81] In any case, epistemological moral scepticism typically concerns moral knowledge and justification of moral beliefs.

People can adopt three basic doxastic attitudes towards a particular proposition: believe that it is true, believe that it is false, or suspend judgment about its trueness. A traditional philosophical conception of knowledge defines it as 'true belief' or 'true justified belief'. Having knowledge of something seems to require having a belief which is true and justified, obtained and maintained by proper reasoning, not simply based on guessing or a mere chance. A justified belief is usually regarded as a necessary condition, although not a sufficient one. The second necessary condition for knowledge is a belief's conformity with the truth.[82]

Disagreement presents an epistemological challenge because it suggests that our beliefs might be false or insufficiently justified, hence undermining our claim to knowledge. Suppose that two people find themselves in a disagreement over a particular problem. Having reviewed the evidence, their method and respective lines of reasoning, neither of them detects any errors, and both are convinced that their judgement is right and justified, whilst simultaneously being puzzled by the fact that their peer arrived at a different conclusion. The epistemological challenge of disagreement becomes particularly pronounced if it is between people who are considered to be *epistemic peers*, i.e. they are equally knowledgeable and intellectually competent having the same extent of relevant knowledge on which they can base their

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[81] Non-cognitivist theories are typical example of this approach.

[82] Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, 11, 17-18. The role of 'true justified belief' might differ depending on a particular theoretical approach (for example, a minimalist approach might define knowledge as 'reasonably justified belief', or assesses justification with regard to coherence of a set of beliefs).

reasoning. In cases of persistent disagreement between epistemic peers, one might be left wondering which doxastic attitude should be adopted in such circumstances.

One option is to adopt the *steadfast approach*,[83] standing one's ground and seeking further evidence to vindicate the supposedly right conclusion or determine potential flaws in the opponent's line of reasoning, which further perpetuates the existing disagreement. An alternative option, the *conciliatory approach*,[84] suggests that in case of prevailing disagreement between epistemic peers, people should suspend belief about the truth of the matter, not having confidence in either of the two contradictory beliefs, and possibly seek more evidence or improved method of justification to help them resolve their disagreement and discover the truth. Yet, the conditions of epistemic uncertainty in the face of disagreement give rise to sceptical concerns about the possibility of moral knowledge, and – if one ultimately adopts the sceptical view – a denial of such a possibility, or suspension of judgement about whether moral knowledge or epistemic justification of moral belief is possible.[85] As such, prevailing moral disputes between epistemic peers provide a route from disagreement to moral *scepticism* about moral knowledge or about *justification of moral beliefs*.[86]

Fundamental Moral Disagreement

I have mentioned that the *mere existence* of disagreement does not necessarily pose a serious challenge for moral realism. Many moral realists are correct to point out that people being in disagreement about some question – even if such a disagreement were indeed *widespread* and *persistent* – does not entail that there is no objective answer, no objective fact of the matter, nor does it imply that knowledge of such objective facts is unattainable.

The core question in the debate on the significance of moral disagreement and its implications for moral realism is whether moral disagreement is *fundamental*, i.e. the kind of disagreement that would prevail

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[83] See David Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy," Philosophy Compass 4/5 (2009): 756.
[84] Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 756-9. Cf. Katia Vavova. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014): 302-327.
[85] These two main versions of modern epistemological moral scepticism derive from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, the first corresponding to Academic scepticism and the latter Pyrrhonism.
[86] Richard Joyce, "Arguments from Moral disagreement to Moral scepticism," 155.

even if any deficiency in relevant non-moral information or cognitive shortcomings of the people involved were eliminated.[87] Moral realists typically deny that moral disagreement is of the fundamental kind, arguing that actual moral disagreement can be rationally resolved under *optimal epistemic conditions*. These optimal conditions, roughly speaking, mean that all relevant non-moral facts are available and there are no logical errors or biases on the part of people involved in disagreement.[88] As such, moral realists advocating this view dispute that actual disagreement, albeit widespread and seemingly persistent, is in fact *fundamental* and would persist even under said optimal conditions.[89]

In response to the sceptical arguments from disagreement, moral realists tend to claim that the significance of moral disagreement is overestimated, the realists claim, as the empirically observed moral disagreements are merely superficial, not fundamental,[90] meaning that cases can be explained by non-moral factors and allow for a rational solution. Generally speaking, the proponents of moral realism respond to the claims that actual seemingly intractable moral disagreement appears to be fundamental, hence supporting sceptical conclusions about the existence of objective moral facts, by (1.) disputing that the antirealist arguments entail a denial of moral realism,[91] and (2.) suggesting various explanations of the nature of disagreement that are intended to counter the sceptical arguments and show that existent moral disagreement is compatible with the main tenets of moral realism. In the following chapter, we will examine these responses in more detail.

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[87] Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," 366. Horn argues that fundamental moral disagreements are those which are caused by, or ultimately traceable to a *systemic* difference in moral intuitions. There are other ways of defining fundamental disagreement, too. See, for instance, Christian Meyers, "Defending moral realism from empirical evidence of disagreement," 376-7, providing a simpler definition: "Fundamental disagreements are ones that cannot be resolved by appeal to more central shared values or negotiated away on the basis of some common ground."

[88] See John M. Doris and Alexandra Plakias, "How to Argue about Disagreement: Evaluative Diversity and Moral Realism," in *Moral Psychology Volume 2, The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008): 304-5, and Folke Tersman, *Moral Disagreement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 21-22.

[89] Doris and Plakias, "How to Argue about Disagreement: Evaluative Diversity and Moral Realism," 305.
While I use the term 'fundamental' disagreement, some philosophers refer to this kind of disagreement as 'deep' or 'radical' disagreement (Tersman, *Moral Disagreement*, 21-22), The term 'faultless disagreement' has been also occasionally used to convey the idea that none of the participants is at fault, see Max Kölbel, "Faultless Disagreement." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53-73 and Alison Hills, "Faultless Moral Disagreement," *Ratio (new series)* 26 (2013): 410-427.
See also Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. 1, ed. John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 167-196, and Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[90] Tolhurst, "The Argument from Moral Disagreement," 610-621. See also Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[91] See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 23-46.

While it is tempting to defend or further elaborate on various antirealist accounts of morality, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. One does not even have to endorse any sceptical theory of morality in response to the problem of disagreement, advocating some version of non-cognitivism or relativism instead. My goal was to illuminate the challenges posed to moral realism by moral disagreement. I believe that the advocates of moral realism need to support their claims that moral disagreement is non-fundamental by a comprehensive explanatory account of disagreement to be justified in holding that persistent moral disagreement does not undermine their theories.

III. BEING REALISTIC ABOUT DISAGREEMENT: DEFUSING EXPLANATIONS AND THE CONVERGENCE CLAIM

The prevalence of moral disagreement presents a puzzle for moral theorist with regard to an explanation of its nature and a potential answer to the epistemic and practical difficulties entailed to its persistence. The challenges posed by moral disagreement are particularly pertinent for the proponents of moral realism, i.e. the view that moral properties are, in one sense or another, objectively true. While the mere existence of moral disagreement is not commonly considered to provide sufficient grounds to conclude that moral scepticism is true, there is an ongoing debate regarding its significance in moral philosophy, and even moral realists usually admit that it poses *some* problem for their theories, a problem that should be addressed. Analogically, the reality of disagreement alone does not entail that moral realism is false. But moral realism is the primary target of the arguments from disagreement, being considered particularly vulnerable to such arguments invoking the apparently intractable disagreement because it seems to directly contradict the core features of the realist concepts of morality. Moral realist theories typically assert the existence of moral facts, meaning that moral properties are *objectively true*, be it due to their metaphysical status as stance-independent facts, or by the virtue of them being construed or conceived as universally normative.

Moral realists are committed to holding that there are that moral claims express propositions which are either true or false, and some of our moral judgements and claims are true.[92] The truth of these propositions is defined either by objective, stance-independent facts, or by universally applicable, although response-dependent, principles. Widespread disagreement concerning moral facts calls into question the realist views on morality. It is not so because of folk moral disagreement would not evidently conceive of moral claims as non-objective, but due to apparent intractability of actual moral disagreements. The failure

[92] See Smith, "Realism", 401-5. Smith describes the two types of moral realism with regard to different conceptions of moral facts, the first being classic 'objectivist' realism (in the metaphysical sense), while the second conception of moral fact is "a fact about what we have reason to do or not to do". Smith goes on to present the second approach as "'subjectivist' conception of moral facts" ("Realism," 409), arguing that these facts are subjective only innocuously, as they are facts about "what we would want under certain idealized conditions of reflection". What makes them 'objective', however, is that they apply universally (i.e. to all people) and their aptness for convergence, that is, upon idealized conditions of reflection, all rational beings would converge in their desire of such outcome (i.e. a fact coming true).

to reach an agreement or even a compromise with regard to moral values seem to undermine the realist views on the nature of moral discourse and the methods of moral inquiry.

While moral realism often refers to a variety of theoretical frameworks, one of its defining features is that it is committed to, or strongly associated with, universalism about moral truths.[93] Following the detailed exposition of the challenge from disagreement in the previous chapter, we can outline the main challenge from disagreement in the following way: According to moral realism, there are objective moral truths and people can learn about them. If moral realist theories were right, there would be relatively little disagreement about moral matters. However, widespread moral disagreement across the world exists and persist, which undermines the core postulates of moral realism. The presence of disagreement itself does not vindicate moral scepticism or anti-realism. But it does call the realist account of morality into question, demanding an explanation as to why – if moral realism is true – moral disagreement prevails.

Defusing Explanations of Disagreement

There are several responses to the argument from disagreement, which are popular among the advocates of moral realisms to such a degree that they can be referred to as the standard *defusing* explanations[94] or replies to the problem moral disagreement that moral realists tend to use:

1. Moral disagreement can be traced to *disagreement about relevant non-moral matters*. The following claim by Richard Boyd epitomises this view: "careful philosophical examination will reveal […] that agreement on nonmoral issues would eliminate *almost all* disagreement about the sorts of moral issues which arise in ordinary moral practice."[95]

2. *Cognitive shortcomings of the participants* hinders potential resolution of their moral disagreements. Such cognitive shortcomings include *irrationality*, *various biases* and *logical errors* affecting their reasoning and clouding their judgment pertaining to moral issues. Moral realists might argue that explains the persistence and apparent intractability of actual moral disagreements. As Russ Shafer-Landau notes, "disagreement

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[93] See van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 143, and Hare, "Universal Prescriptivism," 451-463.
[94] Doris and Plakias, "How to Argue about Disagreement," 311, 320.
[95] Richard Boyd, "How to be a moral realist," in *Essays on moral realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 213. Cf. David O. Brink, *Moral realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 202-203.

suggests a fault of at least one of the interlocutors [such as] … some irrational emotional response that stands as a barrier to moral convergence."[96]

3. *Partiality or Self-Interest* are other factors which are assumed to thwart moral agreement. Nicholas Sturgeon believes that at least some moral disagreements, rather than revealing the complex nature of moral discourse or moral thought, expose the tendency of participants to pursue what they perceive as in their advantage.[97] This observation is even compatible with the philosophical position known as *psychological egoism*[98] some of the well-known phenomena from the field of social psychology, namely, *in-group favouritism* and *social conformity*.[99]

4. *Background theory*. This does not involve only normative theories such as deontology and consequentialism, but also metaethical theories such as realism or anti-realism. Disagreements about particular moral issues can be also explained by different moral theories to which the interlocutors appeal, or even inadvertently subscribe. In this vein, Daniels notes that "If . . . moral disagreements can be traced to disagreements about [background] theory, greater moral agreement may result."[100] This explanation of persistent moral disputes is arguably most relevant for *philosophical disagreements*. Derek Parfit,[101] whose theory I discuss below, paid special attention to this sort of moral disagreement, seeking moral theory that would allow for normative convergence amongst the proponents of various and seemingly incompatible ethical systems and theories.

The primary function of defusing explanations put forward by the moral realists is to respond to the challenge of moral disagreement. Nevertheless, these responses also serve another purpose concerning the question of moral convergence. The main line of reasoning involved in the discussed defusing

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[96] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral realism: A Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 218. See also Shafer-Landau, "Ethical disagreement, Ethical Objectivism and Moral Indeterminacy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 2 (1994): 331-332. Cf. Brink, *Moral realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 199–200.

[97] see Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral explanations," in *Essays on moral realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 229-230.

[98] Being predominantly a descriptive theory, *psychological egoism* maintains that all human actions – when properly understood – can be seen as motivated by selfish desires. People are primarily capable of desiring or pursuing what ultimately (as an end in itself) is their *own* self-interest or at least perceived to be so. See Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition, ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 167.

[99] See, for instance, David Jennings and Stuart Wattam, *Decision Making: An Integrated Approach* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 1998), 97-8. See also Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 315-331. Tendency to conform or favour own social group and its practices, attitudes etc.

[100] Norman Daniels, "Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76, no. 5 (1979): 262.

[101] Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 543-546, 570.

explanations of disagreement extends beyond a defence against the antirealists, as it outlines a positive argument concerning the conditions of widespread moral agreement, namely, that if people manage to overcome non-moral factors hindering moral reasoning, widespread disagreement will cease, and convergence of moral views will ensue.[102] In fact, many moral realists believe that one of the goals of successful moral inquiry is said convergence of moral beliefs among people, although they differ on the question whether a lack of convergence is in any way indicative of the failure of philosophical inquiry into moral issues thus far.[103]

There are two ways a moral realist might employ the notion to moral convergence. As mentioned above, the want of moral convergence is examined as a part of the realists explanatory account of the causes of existing disagreement. It does not need to involve denying that actual moral disagreement in the world is indeed widespread, but it insists that the existing disagreement is explicable by various non-moral factors and shortcomings hindering moral inquiry. If people were able to overcome these shortcomings, they would readily converge on moral beliefs. I refer to the view which entails making predictions about widespread moral convergence under favourable epistemic circumstances the *convergence* thesis.

Moreover, some moral realists also appeal to a supposed convergence of moral views and the cases of moral agreement observable in the world as a part of their argument for moral realism – the *convergence* argument.[104] The argument invokes general agreement on major moral questions, taking it as evidence, or at least empirical instantiation, of moral progress in terms of our knowledge of objective moral facts. On this view, continuous and careful examination of moral matters, as well as historical eradication of various non-moral factors impeding moral inquiry, leads to an overall improvement of people's understanding, facilitating a general progress in moral knowledge. Since people's education and moral understanding has been growing through history, more and more people have a capacity for recognizing what truly is moral and immoral, meaning that discovery of stance-independent moral becomes available to an increasing portion of the population. This leads to convergence of moral views between individuals, as well as between societies. Empirical instances illustrating such convergence in moral beliefs – similar to

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[102] For example, David Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 337, 360-362.

[103] See Grace Helton, "Viewpoint Convergence as a Philosophical Defect," unpublished manuscript, January 2022, typescript. Helton discusses the 'pro-convergence thesis' about philosophical inquiry, a normative view holding that "that ideal philosophical progress is marked by at least some degree of convergence on the core philosophical questions".

[104] Michael Huemer, "A liberal realist answer to debunking skeptics: The empirical case for realism," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 7 (2016): 2000-2001.

convergence in beliefs about the world prompted by the process of scientific discovery – indicates that moral inquiry has in fact been fruitful.

The two strategies can be combined together. The latter serves as a counterevidence against the arguments from disagreement, being used to illustrate that extensive moral convergence is possible and to show that moral inquiry can be successful,[105] while it aids the convergence thesis as a predictive claim that under favourable circumstances, disagreement would diminish and widespread moral convergence would occur.

Assuming that moral realism is correct about the truth-aptness of moral beliefs, it is reasonable to expect that people's moral views would eventually converge. This view is common among the proponents of moral realism, as it appears to be an implication of its core claims. Moral realists do not need to commit to the claim that *actual* widespread agreement will obtain, or make predictions about moral future convergence, although those endorsing moral objectivism or universalism usually do so, albeit in the conditional form.[106] Moral arguments seem to be commonly treated as the best way to discover or determine the moral truths, and, as Michael Smith puts it, "if the participants are open-minded and thinking clearly then we seem to think that such an argument should result in a *convergence* in moral opinion – a convergence upon the truth."[107]

Moral realism implies that such a result is attainable, i.e. that moral disagreement could be overcome, that the convergence of moral views is possible or *would* be possible under favourable conditions, and the discovery of moral truths remains a viable outcome of moral inquiry. To support this view, the proponents of the convergence thesis designed several arguments, which are simultaneously used to defend realism against the antirealist challenges from disagreement.

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[105] Being successful with regard to it its putative truth-tracking function.

[106] In order to prevent a potential inconsistency or futility of their theories, as they would either need to rely on faith, or allow for Pyrrhonism. However, cf. Sarah McGrath, "Moral Realism without Convergence," *Philosophical Topics* 38, no. 2 (2010): 59-90, or Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism," in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 57-62.
Others have also voiced an opinion that a failure of convergence would not necessarily undermine moral theory, or moral justifications, for example Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 280.

[107] Michael Smith, "Realism," in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 63.

MORAL AND NON-MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

Because moral realism holds that moral claims aim to report truth-apt facts and moral judgements relate to the properties of the world in the same way that our ordinary non-moral beliefs do, the realists often portraying moral disputes as *factual* disagreements. Although it concerns moral facts, the nature of disagreement is similar to a situation when two parties disagree about some ordinary factual or scientific beliefs. Thus, one of the popular strategies among moral realists confronted with the arguments from disagreement is to contend that disagreement about moral matters is comparable to other factual disagreements about non-moral matters.

The proponents of this view argue that disagreements, sometimes widespread and persistent, are likely to be found in any other field of human inquiry, such as science[108] or mathematics.[109] Since moral disagreements are not unlike disagreements in other domains, the realist argument goes, there is no reason to consider it somehow unique and especially problematic for moral realism. The presence of such non-moral disagreement, which might sometimes seem at least as persistent and prevalent as disagreement about moral matters, does not typically lead people to question the existence of objectively true answers to the subject of their inquiry. Scientific disagreements, for example, are not commonly understood as evidence of the impossibility of scientific knowledge, nor do they undermine the idea of future convergence after the factors presently obstructing the progress of particular inquiry are eliminated, for instance, by obtaining further empirical evidence or more advanced technology.

Drawing an analogy between moral and non-moral factual disagreements enables the moral realists to suggest that they share similar features, as well as causes. They can then argue that moral disputes are rooted in disagreement about non-moral factors and facts. For instance, people's disagreements over the justification of capital punishment might stem from different beliefs concerning retributive justice or its supposed deterring effects in preventing prospective criminals from committing severe wrongdoings.[110] Another examples of the same kind are persistent disagreements generated by opposite views on the moral

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[108] Richard Boyd, "How to be a Moral realist," 181-3. Boyd's defence of moral realism is inspired by the arguments for scientific realism. Railton describes it as "the generic stratagem of naturalistic realism." – Peter Railton, *Facts, values, and norms*: *Essays toward a morality of consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9. For a critique of such an approach, see Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 303-4

[109] Michael Smith draws an analogy between morality and mathematics, suggesting that both should have a 'privileged rational status' (while only the latter seems to currently enjoy such a status); Smith, "Realism," 408-9.

[110] Chris D. Meyers, "Defending moral realism from empirical evidence of disagreement," *Social Theory and Practice* 39, no. 3 (2013): 376-7.

status of abortion[111] or euthanasia, both of which could be explained with a reference to different beliefs about the effects of these policies. These associated beliefs are non-moral as they concern empirical facts about the world, like the questions whether a foetus or a comatose patient are *sentient beings* (that is, people or 'persons'– although this is already involves some philosophical theory of personhood), but at the same time, they are empirically unsettled and thus generate opposing moral views. It could be argued that divergent moral views in this example originate simply due to implications of one common principle (i.e. not killing innocent, sentient people), in the light of differing conceptions of the facts.

But the example of the question of personhood pertaining to the disagreements over abortion brings to forth that even non-moral facts are subject to evaluation or interpretation, hence, if moral disagreement is to be non-fundamental, it also requires a reliable and shared method of inquiry. In another words, people in disagreement need a shared point of reference consisting in a groundwork for assessing non-moral facts, as well as a method of justification of particular (moral) beliefs. As Chris Meyers puts it, "For moral disagreement to warrant scepticism about moral facts, the disagreements must also be fundamental, not superficial. Fundamental disagreements are ones that cannot be resolved by appeal to more central shared values or negotiated away on the basis of some common ground."[112]

Moral realists who invoke the analogy between scientific and moral disagreement can use it to support their argument in two ways: first, they can argue that actual disagreement in a given field of inquiry simply does not substantiate sceptical conclusions about the epistemic accessibility of the subject matter, nor does it rule out the possibility of convergence. Alternatively, a moral realist may claim that in spite of intractable moral disagreement with little hope of convergence, realism is still a viable and generally acceptable view, as the existence of disagreement reveals only the epistemic shortcomings on our side, but it has little bearing on the existence of moral facts (just as potential epistemics or theoretical shortcomings does not typically lead us to question the existence of natural facts about the world as the subject of scientific inquiry, only of the adequacy of our scientific methods and theories).

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[111] It might seem that these issues are the matter of political rather than moral disagreement. But many political disputes are rooted in diverging moral standpoints related to the subject in question, and neglecting various moral concerns them under the pretence of impartiality and non-moral basis of politics could undermine the instrumentality and supposed legitimacy of the state and its institutions. For a discussion to this topic, see Sandel, *Justice*, 251-3.

[112] Meyers, "Defending moral realism from empirical evidence of disagreement," 376-7.

A common response to this argument, however, is that there is a substantial difference between moral disagreement and disagreement which occurs in the other fields of human inquiry. Taking empirical sciences as an example, the critics of the analogy point out that even if one agrees that moral disputes concern matters of fact, there is still a difference between factual or scientific claims, on one hand, and moral claims on the other. The first aim to describe the world as it is, while the latter involves evaluative (normative) claims about what the world *should* be like. What is more, the basis of disagreement in these two domains of inquiry differs substantially, as noted by John Mackie, who argued that "scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence",[113] a sentiment echoed in the works of other philosophers, for example Bernard Williams, who disputed that moral and scientific disagreement are of the same kind.[114]

MORAL PROGRESS

Some moral realists also claim that while there is apparent moral disagreement, there is also empirical evidence of some amount of moral agreement or convergence of moral views. Some of the issues that used to be a point of contention with regard to their moral status are currently much less controversial, some even being a matter of almost unequivocal consensus. Common examples used to support the empirical account of purportedly increasing convergence on specific moral issues or a particular set of moral values over time, are societal views on slavery, homosexuality, extramarital sex, or equal treatment of women and ethnic minorities.

Even here, moral realists endorsing this line of reasoning might inspiration in other fields of inquiry, particularly among the arguments for scientific realism which appeal to the gradual convergence of scientific knowledge that occurs there. Invoking the comparison between moral and scientific inquiry, such arguments may claim that just as the progress of scientific discovery was hindered by various non-scientific factors in the past, for example by the influence of religion or technological underdevelopment, at least until the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, so has the progress of moral inquiry been distorted or detained by the prevailing external influences (e.g. religious views, conformism, political ideologies and so forth) in ways that do not promote truth-seeking.

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[113] Mackie, *Ethics*, 36.
[114] Williams, "The Scientific and the Ethical,", 304.

In this vein, Derek Parfit[115] noted that since secular moral inquiry based on reason and rigorous, unprejudiced examination of ethical concepts and principles has been pursued for a relatively short time, it might be premature to draw antirealist conclusions from the apparent lack of moral convergence not only among ordinary folk, but also among moral philosophers, i.e. the assumed experts, who are expected to be well-versed in the study of moral knowledge. Parfit argued that it is not irrational to be hopeful that a greater convergence in moral views and theories will occur similarly as it that has occurred in the sciences. Again, moral realists may argue that in this sense, moral inquiry bears resemblance to scientific inquiry. In particular, the notion of scientific progress is associated with the convergence of scientific views and explanations over the course of history.[116] Discovery of moral truths, the argument goes, is in some way similar to scientific discovery in the fields like physics or medicine.[117] The convergence of moral views occurs – or can occur – because people are getting closer to discovering the truth, i.e. the accurate representation of the world and how it really is.

Michael Huemer[118] puts forward such an argument, invoking widespread convergence in the views on slavery or equal treatment of minorities, which he relates to the global spread of liberalism and the notion of universal human rights. In particular, Huemer argues that over the course of centuries, many societies have moved towards a set of liberal values. According to Huemer, this historical record shows a trend of moral convergence, which provides empirical evidence in support of moral realism. The argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation, claiming that based on such empirical observations of historical data, "it is reasonable to endorse moral realism, unless and until a better account appears."[119] This strategy mirrors the structure of Mackie's original argument from disagreement, which employed the inference to the best explanation from moral disagreement to argue against plausibility of moral realism. Huemer's denies this, appealing to the cases contradicting Mackie's observation, which Huemer sees as an indication that moral inquiry has been at least somewhat successful and reliable as a process of truth-

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[115] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 454. Michal Smith makes a similar suggestion regarding non-moral influences (e.g. a false account of human nature or Judeo-Christian religious beliefs) that hindered the progress in moral inquiry in the past. See Smith, "Realism," 409.

[116] Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical, 292. ("It is quite hard to deny that that history displays a considerable degree of convergence," Williams admits.)

[117] See, for example, Paul Bloomfield, "Disagreement about Disagreement," in *Moral Psychology Volume 2, The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, ed. by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008): 339-344.

[118] Huemer, "A liberal realist answer to debunking skeptics," 2001.

[119] Huemer, "A liberal realist answer to debunking skeptics," 2008. For a reply to Huemer's claim – pointing out what is arguably 'a better account' (at least if judged in terms of its explanatory virtues) – see Jeroen Hopster, "Explaining historical moral convergence: The empirical case against realist intuitionism," *Philosophical Studies* 177 (2020): 1255-1273.

tracking of the objective moral facts. This suggests, Huemer argues, that people have some epistemic access to mind-independent moral facts, and that the convergence of moral views can and will continue based on this process.

However, this argument is problematic, as it presumes that our current account of moral truths is correct and conclusive, either on the grounds of the present convergence of moral views, or (in some cases) using the convergence as an indicator determining the content of objective moral truths. This understanding of moral progress relates to moral objectivism that asserts that moral facts are mind-independent and epistemically accessible, like Huemer does. However, one could endorse an alternative conception of moral progress corresponding with the universalist type of moral constructivism, according to which moral standards are 'made true' by being endorsed from a particular viewpoint,[120] typically by rational agents, like on Smith's view.[121]

In either case, the convergence of moral views is invoked to counter or weaken the anti-realist arguments from widespread disagreement, (2) show that the notion of moral convergence is not merely hypothetical, but actually possible, and – at least for some relists – to (3) argue that the apparent cases of moral convergence suggest that moral facts are epistemically accessible, and people are capable of tracking moral truths in the way that moral values converge. Such arguments can be disputed in a similar manner that the arguments for scientific realism have been. First, the argument that a purported or actual moral convergence demonstrates that people have some epistemic access to mind-independent moral facts is apparently circular, as it presupposes that what people hold to be true (and agree on it) provides some evidence of the existence of mind-independent moral facts and their epistemic accessibility. For instance, Huemer's moral realism is of the rational intuitionist kind.[122] And his conception of these moral intuitions – in relation to the purported existence of moral facts – resembles in some way the ontological argument for the existence of God. As such, it is prone to the same weaknesses[123] and can be undermined by pointing out that it rests on a fallacy, because it's assumption that our intuitions accurately represent the world is largely unsubstantiated. As long as the question concerns stance-independent facts, appealing to

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[120] For a realist criticism of this view, see Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 16.
[121] Smith uses an example of giving to famine relief, see Smith, "Realism", 407-408.
[122] In his own terms, a "rationalist view of probabilistic reasoning" appealing to "necessary constraints on logical probabilities," which, Huemer argues, are intuitively seen or known to be correct. Michael Huemer, "There Is No Pure Empirical Reasoning," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95, no. 3 (2017): 602.
[123] Consider, for example, Hume's critique in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, XI, 105-9, XII, 120-132.

widespread agreement among people, even if it were a unanimous consensus, does not justify the claim to knowledge of their nature, especially if people's beliefs about said nature is not merely descriptive (factual) and involves a normative (evaluative) element.

Since moral realism asserts that moral views are universal, it needs to explain the presence of disagreement among people in the way consistent with the realist concept of morality and moral agreement. For example, the claim that widespread convergence of moral views would be possible under the ideal conditions, meaning that it requires such ideal conditions, needs account for the actual cases of moral agreement in the world, particularly with regard to the question of why and these cases of apparent moral agreement happened outside of the ideal epistemic conditions. An antirealist is not required to postulate account for such cases of localized agreement when considering moral disagreement globally, insofar as it does not endorse an alternative metaethical thesis or a substantive moral theory incompatible with some agreement in moral views among people.[124]

The Rational Convergence Thesis

In response to the argument from disagreement, moral realists advocating the attainability of widespread moral convergence commonly put forward counterarguments involving *rational* elimination of disagreement under epistemically optimal conditions.[125] The description of said 'optimal conditions' may vary, although it usually invokes the notion of ideal epistemic situations and appeals to reason and

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[124] And the sceptical theories which suggest this, e.g. the error theory, usually have their explanation of what moral agreement or apparent convergence signifies – typically claiming that it is merely an agreement of opinions, conventionalism or conformism, which does not is arbitrary and does not tell us anything about the nature of purportedly mind-independent moral facts.

[125] Smith, "Realism," 409; Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 546-7. Other examples include Boyd ("How to be a moral realist,") and Brink ("Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness").

The optimal conditions may vary in terms of putting stress on different aspects of what makes the conditions 'optimal'. For instance, Michael Smith describes the conception of 'objective' (non-metaphysical) moral facts in relation to a convergence of rational desires which would happen under 'idealized conditions of reflection' ("Realism", 409), and explains the condition of being 'fully rational' by introducing the distinction between the 'evaluating' world, i.e. hypothetical, world and desires pertaining to a course of action in the '*evaluated*' world, i.e. non-idealized, real world. Reflecting on the facts about one's desires in the evaluating world establishes one's normative reasons in the evaluated world, i.e. the real-life circumstances: "If we call the possible world in which A is fully rational the 'evaluating' world, and the possible world in which A is in circumstances C the 'evaluated' world, then my proposal is that facts about A's normative reasons in the evaluated world are constituted by facts about the desires she has in the evaluating world about what she is to do in the evaluated world." – Michael Smith, "Normative Reasons and Full Rationality: Reply to Swanton." *Analysis* 56, no. 3 (Jul 1996): 160-1. See also Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 156-61.

rationality. In general, the optimal conditions include (1.) impartiality, (2.) rational judgement, and (3.) accessibility of all relevant non-moral facts. Under the optimal conditions, moral realists argue, disagreement would disappear, as it is mainly caused by the fact that said conditions are usually not satisfied. Still, epistemic fallibility of either of the parties involved in moral disagreement does not render moral realism implausible and does not rule out the possibility of overcoming present disagreement, should the optimal epistemic conditions come about.

Michael Smith, one of the supporters of the *convergence thesis*,[126] acknowledges that the notion of moral objectivity is strongly connected with a potential convergence in moral views. It is expected that moral inquiry – under the conditions of proper reflection, sound reasoning, and deliberation – should generate substantial agreement in moral views.[127] Similarly, Derek Parfit believed that people can converge in their moral views, as moral judgements are contingent upon normative reasons and our capacity to recognize what he called *normative* (or reason-giving) *facts.*[128]

Based on this line of reasoning, moral realists frequently invoke the *convergence claim*, a thesis that rational individuals who are fully informed about the relevant nonmoral facts and use the same normative concepts would not hold incompatible moral views. Derek Parfit formulates the convergence claim in the following way:

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[126] I use the term 'convergence thesis' for a realist view holding that an objective appraisal of moral facts and/or normative reasons entails the possibility of significant convergence in moral beliefs among people, *and* that such convergence is *attainable* under favourable epistemic conditions. There is a more moderate version of 'convergence thesis', which does not assert that general moral convergence is actually attainable, only that it is conceptually possible. This version of moral realism would salvage its metaphysical commitments, but at the expense of the epistemological commitment, implying that the epistemic accessibility of moral facts is very limited and moral knowledge is unwarranted even under favourable epistemic circumstances. It is likely that most moral realist would consider such 'epistemic impotence' unappealing.

[127] Smith, "Realism," 66-67. Smith's conception of *possible* moral convergence draws on his conception of moral facts (in his own words, "a more 'subjectivist' conception of moral facts"), as their acknowledgment necessarily has a bearing on people's *reason-susceptible* desires. Due to this, Smith conceives of moral facts as queer facts, which are nevertheless objective "insofar as they are facts about what *we* would want under idealized conditions of reflection."

[128] Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1, 111-129. Note that philosophers endorsing the possibility of moral convergence might offer different explanations as to how such convergence can be achieved. For example, Smith and Parfit differ in their conception of normative reasons, particularly with regard to the origin of such reasons: Parfit offers an objectivist conception of normative facts, seeing the source of normativity in external facts about the world, while Smith presents a subjectivist conception of normative facts, as on his view they are appraiser-dependent. See Michael Smith, "Parfit's Mistaken Meta-Ethics," in *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*, ed. Peter Singer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 113-118.

> "If everyone knew all of the relevant non-normative facts, used the same normative concepts, understood and carefully reflected on the relevant arguments, and was not affected by any distorting influence, we would have similar normative beliefs."[129]

Philosophers endorsing the possibility of moral convergence might offer different explanations as to how such convergence can be achieved. For example, Smith and Parfit differ in their conception of normative reasons,[130] particularly with regard to the origin of such reasons: Parfit offers an objectivist conception of normative facts, seeing the source of normativity in external facts about the world, while Smith presents a subjectivist conception of normative facts, as on his view they are appraiser-dependent.[131] Nevertheless, they agree on the possibility of moral convergence, putting forward the convergence conjecture in response to the challenge of disagreement. Parfit argued that "Since our normative beliefs are neither caused by what we believe, nor based on empirical evidence, we need another word to refer to our way of forming these beliefs. On the view that I have called *intuitionism*: We have *intuitive* abilities to respond to reasons and to recognize some normative truths."[132] Parfit's envisioning of rational moral convergence is in many ways illustrative of the idea shared by many moral realists.[133] Considering the structure of Mackie's argument from disagreement, moral realists typically dispute that a differential access to a common moral reality undermines moral objectivity and argue that moral disagreement observed in the world can be explained by a potential lack of non-moral facts or faults in people's reasoning. If these

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[129] Parfit, *On What Matters,* Vol. 2, 546, 570.

[130] Smith, "Parfit's Mistaken Meta-Ethics," 118.

[131] Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 6. Smith clarifies his conception of objective 'moral facts' in the following way: "Facts about what we have normative reason to do are constructed facts: they are facts about the desires we would all converge on if we were to come up with a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires," Michael Smith, "In Defense of "The Moral Problem": A Reply to Brink, Copp, and Sayre-McCord," 97, 106. This underlines the core feature of Smith's moral realism, i.e. that possible convergence rests on the condition of converging desires of 'fully rational' appraisers.

[132] Parfit, *On What Matters,* Vol. 2, 544.

[133] I consider Parfit's theory to be an example of non-metaphysical moral realism. Note that Parfit himself referred to his view as to "non-metaphysical non-naturalism" (*On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 486), and later as to "non-realist cognitivism" (*On What Matters*, Vol. 3, 2017, 49), possibly to distance himself from the metaphysical moral objectivism. It is unclear, however, in which way his approach differs from moral realism in the broader sense, especially moral universalism, as Parfit defends a view postulating that moral facts ('normative') facts are "objectively true and justified" (*On What Matters*, Vol. 3, 236 – cf. 195, 577), making Parfit – in his own terms – an *objectivist* about reasons (Vol. 1, 65).
Parfit's metaethical views sometimes come across as baffling or hard to pin down, as it seems that in the third volume of *On What Matters,* Vol. 3 (2017), Parfit takes a notable conceptual turn, or at least makes a shift (analytical or semantic) and appears to backtrack on his previously unfavourable views on some of the rival metaethical theories (namely, the positions of Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton, representing particular versions of non-cognitivism and moral naturalism, respectively). I am afraid that in spite of the impressive volume of Parfit's monograph, the coherence and applicability of his metaethical theory is questionable at best. As Fischer puts it, "it seemed that [Parfit's] non-realist cognitivism's features are incompatible to the point of unintelligibility." See Stefan Fischer, "Still a Misty Mountain: Assessing Parfit's Non-Realist Cognitivism," *Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie* 2, no. 2 (2019): 229.

shortcomings are eliminated, moral disagreements will be rationally resolved. As mentioned earlier, this view on the question of disagreement is not uncommon among the proponents of moral realism, being in fact so prevalent that it can considered standard or typical.[134] A reply to the standard argument from disagreement from the realists leaning in this direction might be thus formalized in the following way:

(1) There is widespread moral disagreement between individuals and communities who make moral judgements.

(2) Existing disagreement might be explained by faulty reasoning based on deficiency in relevant non-moral facts, logical errors, or other cognitive shortcomings of at least one of the involved parties.

(3) Eliminating all factual and cognitive shortcomings would entail resolving moral disagreement.

(4) Any remaining cases of moral disagreement may be attributed to non-moral factors such as potential semantic indeterminacy or people's irrational tendencies, which distort proper reasoning about moral issues.

(5) People are able to overcome or mitigate these distorting factors. Given that the capacity of reason is universally human and true moral judgements are discovered or justified rationally, people can reasonably expect that widespread moral disagreement is resolvable by the means of proper reasoning ad deliberation.

(6) Mere prevalence of moral disagreement does not undermine the notion of moral objectivity, nor does rule out that moral disagreements can be rationally resolved once the conditions above are satisfied.

(7) This explanation of moral disagreement is the most reasonable, as it factors prevalent intuitions about the nature of morality, i.e. objective conception and normative aspects of moral beliefs, which commonly motivates people to engage in moral arguments and persevere in it.

Conclusion: Moral disagreement is explained by non-moral factors. If people eliminate all mistakes in their reasoning and false non-moral beliefs, they will be able to solve moral disagreement rationally.

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[134] See, for example, Simon Fitzpatrick, "Moral Realism, Moral Disagreement, and Moral Psychology," *Philosophical Papers* 43, no. 2: 162.

Moral realists tend to defend the possibility of moral convergence, arguing that the antirealist arguments would be supported only if disagreement prevailed in ideal conditions. However, one might respond that even widespread moral agreement would not immediately vindicate moral realism, as a number of conceptual issues pertaining to the realist epistemology would still prevail. A significant convergence of moral views would support realism if the best explanation for such convergence is that overcoming the factors distorting moral reasoning led people to be able to appreciate moral truths.

Empirical Conjectures of Moral Realism

Moral realists reject the antirealist accounts of disagreement and contend that actual disagreement is best explained by various non-moral factors distorting our moral reasoning. These factors include beliefs about the relevant non-moral facts, different background theories, the imprecision of concepts, and various cognitive shortcomings (such as biases, partiality and stubbornness, or unfounded religious convictions). Looking at the realist assessment of the argument from disagreement, it predominantly focuses on the logical structure of the argument. Moral realists rightly point out that the occurrence of moral disagreements does not in itself warrant scepticism, nor does it significantly undermine moral realism. While some realists question the extent of moral disagreement in the world, especially with regard to it being characterized as 'widespread', many advocates of realism are willing to concede that disagreement about moral issues appears to be widespread whilst maintaining that such disagreement is caused by non-moral factors and if we could overcome these impediments, moral disagreement would be resolved.

On this view, moral realists admit that the prevalence of moral disagreement seems problematic but reject the conclusion that it undermines the notion of moral objectivity, arguing that any present state of indeterminacy caused by persistent moral disagreement does not rule out the objective existence of moral facts and possibility of discovering them, which would hold true even if not just one, but both parties involved in said disagreement were actually wrong. Moral disagreements between two people can be assessed independently and it might be discovered that both parties were at fault. The epistemological

commitments of moral realism do not entail the claim that if disagreement occurs, one party is right and one is wrong, only that at least one of them is wrong.[135]

They may also invoke the nature of moral intuitions that most people have – intuitions which suggest objective meaning moral beliefs and claims,[136] although the content of particular intuitions might be false. This response is interesting, as it – perhaps inadvertently – brings up the question of reliability of our moral intuitions and justification of particular moral beliefs in the face of moral disagreement, especially if such disagreement involves epistemic peers, as was discussed in the first chapter. However, it also brings back the crucial question whether moral disagreement is fundamental, meaning that it would be based on *systemic difference in people's moral intuitions.*[137] If true, this would arguably pose a serious challenge for moral realism, a more sophisticated one than a mere occurrence of disagreement.

The question whether moral disagreement is fundamental is still undetermined, and the advocates of realism will unsurprisingly argue that this is not the case. According to the moral realists, they can acknowledge that moral disagreement is prevalent, even accept the empirical findings concerning moral reasoning which were discussed in the previous chapter, but object that this simply does not threaten moral realism and that actual moral disagreement is non-fundamental. The range of implicit cognitive processes and subconscious mechanisms involved in moral reasoning might be considered as those logical errors and biases moral realists mean when they invoke various cognitive shortcomings as an explanation of persistent disagreements, hence being compatible with their account of disagreement, or even giving it some empirical support.

The antirealists might respond to such arguments by disputing the soundness of their premises, or to be precise, the likelihood of empirical conjectures involved in the appeals to favourable epistemic circumstances which should facilitate moral convergence. These claims are empirical in so far that they take

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[135] See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 41-44.

[136] Michael Huemer, "There Is No Pure Empirical Reasoning." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95, no. 3 (2017): 592-613. However, many prominent moral realists present arguments (although in a more sophisticated form) appealing to our moral intuitions in one way or another – e.g. Henry Sidgwick, Derek Parfit, Russ Schafer-Landau, David O. Brink, or Robert Audi. Cf. Thomas Pölzler and Jennifer C Wright, "Anti-Realist Pluralism: A New Approach for Folk Metaethics," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2020): 53–82; Geoffrey P. Goodwin and John M. Darley, "The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism." *Cognition* 106 (2008): 1339–1366; Geoffrey P., Goodwin and John M. Darley, "Why are some moral beliefs perceived to be more objective than others?," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48 (2012): 250–256; Matthew Fisher, Joshua Knobe, Brent Strickland, and Frank C. Keil, "The influence of social interaction on intuitions of objectivity and subjectivity," *Cognitive science* 41, no. 4 (2017): 1119-1134.

[137] Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," 366.

into account the nature of human interaction and human thought. As such, they can be empirically tested, or compared with available empirical evidence to determine the likelihood of their occurrence and the expected outcome.

The title of this chapter suggests that ironically, the moral realists' conceptualization of moral disagreement and the prospects of rational convergence might be unrealistic, possibly based on a skewed view of the people's lives, especially non-philosophers. The arguments drawing on idealized circumstances might have some relevance as long as they have bearing on our actual circumstances. It is probable that most people trying to navigate through difficulties associated with actual moral disagreements with their peers would not find the realist explanation particularly helpful. Being realistic about disagreement might entail the possibility that some disagreements are not resolvable. It might also involve reviewing and examining one's conjectures empirically, provided that it is possible. I believe that at least some of the realists' surmises, namely, the ones regarding human rationality and the function of moral reasoning – are fit for such evaluation,

In the next chapter, I will focus on these conjectures to see if, based on available empirical findings in moral psychology, moral realists can actually rely on such assumptions about people's moral thought and expect their ideal conditions to be met, or the outcome of said conditions to favour the core views of moral realism, or at least not call them into question. If not, it might be argued that the justification of the convergence claim is shaky at the very least, relying on a speculative account of human nature and addressing disagreement by invoking a hypothetical, fictitious world and highly improbable, or even imaginary circumstances, hence missing the mark as a response to the problem of disagreement, for it does not address the question whether actual moral disagreement is fundamental.

IV. MORAL REASONING AND DISAGREEMENT: THE EMPIRICAL CHALLENGE FROM MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

When responding to the challenge of intractable moral disagreement, moral realists resort to various explanations which often involve claims regarding human psychology and rationality to clarify how we can overcome alleged shortcomings of moral inquiry and justify that our normative beliefs are true. These claims are inspired by underlying assumptions about the nature of moral judgements and the process of moral reasoning. One of the potential problems with the realist replies is that they are concerned *hypothetical* disagreement under idealized conditions rather than addressing *actual* disagreement in the world. To examine the realist account of disagreement, the following chapter will focus on the relevant empirical research in moral psychology, particularly with regard to moral reasoning and the cognitive processes associated with the formation of moral judgement, to see whether they are compatible with moral realist conjectures of widespread moral convergence.

Moral reasoning plays a key role in moral inquiry and constitutes a crucial component in the process of overcoming the problem of disagreement, at least according to moral realists endorsing the convergence claim. It refers to the cognitive process of forming and reviewing moral judgements in order to determine moral qualities (e.g. 'right'/'wrong') of various acts, events, or entities, and consider applications of moral principles and rules.[138] The purpose of moral reasoning is twofold: to identify and assess morally relevant matters, may that be behaviour, characters, or general principles, and to provide justification to moral beliefs, either for oneself or for the others. There are various classifications of reasoning, one of which distinguishes between *theoretical* reasoning, i.e. using high-level abstraction, hypothetical conditions and generalization, and *practical* reasoning, which aims to be action-guiding, i.e. determine rightness or wrongness of acting in particular way and provide the grounds for decision-making about right

[138] Having its source in or being guided by the intellect (as distinguished from experience or emotion). Rational action – in the broad sense – is understood as acting consistent with or based on reason. See, for example, Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1, 114, as well as Derek Parfit and John Broome, "Reasons and motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society, supplementary volumes* 71 (1997): 111-2, 143-4.

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behaviour.[139] As such, it may concern the agency of an individual person engaged in the reasoning process, but also another person, a social group, or the humankind in general.[140]

The process of moral reasoning might be also considered to be an integral part of dealing with disagreement. When two people find themselves in disagreement with each other, they often try to resolve it rationally, by means of moral reasoning. This approach, being characteristic for moral realism, demonstrates why moral realism is oftentimes associated with moral *rationalism*,[141] i.e. the view that true moral beliefs are either generated, discovered, or ultimately justified by the means of reason. This view, combined with the realist conception of moral truths, entails that moral disagreement can be rationally resolved and convergence of moral views achieved on the basis of conscious reasoning and intellectual examination.

Interpersonal reasoning and Disagreement

Moral disagreement usually manifests itself in when individual views are confronted with the views maintained by other people. It is quite rare for an individual to be in a disagreement with herself, apart from the instances of contrasting one's past and present views. Nonetheless, the study of disagreement typically regards disagreement as a social phenomenon manifested through various human interactions, stemming from and revolving around their communication and interpersonal dynamic[142] with respect to

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[139] Gilbert Harman, Kelby Mason, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral reasoning," in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John M. Doris (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 206-10.

[140] See, for example, a discussion on the universalization and categoricity associated with moral rules in Monica Bucciarelli, Sangeet Khemlani, and P. N. Johnson-Laird, "The psychology of moral reasoning," *Judgment and Decision Making* 3, no. 2 (2008): 124-5.

[141] Be it psychological rationalism (concerning the origins of moral judgements) or justificatory rationalism (concerning the justification of moral beliefs) Richard Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," in *Moral Psychology Volume 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development*, ed. by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 375, 385-6. For an elaborate account of variety of moral rationalism, see Michael Smith, "Three Kinds of Moral Rationalism," in *The Many Moral Rationalisms*, ed. Karen Jones and François Schroeter, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 48-5, or Russ Shafer-Landau, "Moral Rationalism," in *Ethical Theory*: *An Anthology*, Second Edition, ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 165.
However, not every species of moral realism endorses rationalism (or only some of its form). The examples of non-rationalist realism include the types of naturalism known as moral sentimentalism (i.e. the Humean naturalism) or some modern offshoots of expressivism (e.g. Gibbard's version of expressivism).

[142] An interesting variation of this depiction of disagreement might consider difference between dynamic and *stative* disagreements, the first concerning the process of disagreeing, while the latter pertaining to the state of being in disagreement, especially if a prolonged and fierce dispute eventually reaches a standstill characterized by dormant resentment which might be

situations involving exchange of views, expressing or confronting one's moral beliefs with those of other people, be it in a debate, an informal conversation, or any other type of moral discourse.

First, we should consider different notions of reasoning, especially with regard to an important distinction between *internal* and *interpersonal* reasoning. The first type, *internal* (or '*intrapersonal*') reasoning,[143] refers to personal intellectual activity of reflective thinking and individual deliberation, which typically involves inference based on analysing relevant information, as well as or other though processes associated with solving problems and examining particular issues. In terms of practical reason, this type of reasoning takes part in personal decision-making processes regarding a course of action. The second type, *interpersonal* (or *external*)[144] reasoning, consists in conveying reasons and arguments to other people, either to explain and justify our views, or to convince the others and make them acknowledge the validity of stance. Besides argumentation, it might also involve as well as negotiation, bargaining, and other verbal methods purporting to defend one's position or persuade other people.

It is often thought that moral discourse involves both of these types of reasoning, in a linear order, so to speak. Internal reasoning produces and emends moral judgement, which is subsequently conveyed to the others, either as a simple claim drawing on prior results of one's personal deliberation or using external reasoning to disclose internal though processes and justify one's conclusions.

Indeed, the two types of reasoning often overlap. For example, two people arguing over a particular issue can simultaneously engage in internal reasoning, weighing their interlocutor's remarks, deciding what to say next, or considering the validity and coherence of the interlocutor's arguments. It works the other way round too; people may sometimes use interpersonal reasoning to aid their internal reasoning because discussing a problem with someone else helps them to see from a different perspective.

Having said that, there is a difference between the two types of reasoning, as they refer to two rather distinct activities – the first involving mental operations, the other one being articulated, performed,

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easily awaken and turn one's mental defiance into open animosity and confrontation. In psychology, this corresponds quite well with the passive-aggressive attitude.

[143] This account of moral reasoning is inspired by distinctions outlined by Gilbert Harman, Kelly Mason, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Reasoning," in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. by John M. Doris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 207-9.

[144] I prefer the 'internal – interpersonal' terminology rather than the 'internal – external' one to avoid confusion with another problem from moral philosophy, which deals with the question of moral motivation and involves distinguishing between *internal* and *external* reasons as can be seen for instance in Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Reasoning. Studies of Human Inference and Its Foundations*, ed. Jonathan E. Adler and Lance J. Rips (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 60-6.

relating to communication, argumentation, and public deliberation. This distinction suggests that moral reasoning particularly relevant to the problem of moral disagreement is the second kind, i.e. interpersonal reasoning. But this chapter is concerned with internal reasoning as well, particularly with regard to its supposed influence on the process of interpersonal reasoning.

The aim of the following section is to show that the assumption of interconnectedness between the two kinds of reasoning, or even the claim that there is a strong, or even causal link between the two processes is challenged by recent empirical research in moral psychology. Furthermore, it is to consider the implications of empirical findings about the formation of moral judgement with respect to (1.) rational moral inquiry, and (2.) the explanatory force and actual persuasiveness of interpersonal reasoning.

When people engage with the views of other people, their internal reasoning might go on subconsciously, i.e. without them being fully aware of it. This might have a significant bearing on their perception[145] of the issue in question and, by extensions, on their perception of arguments presented in the debate, as well as on their overall attitude toward to other participants in the discussion or standpoints that differ from their own position.[146] Understanding that these predispositions have a crucial effect on the way people approach moral discourse and process the information such as explanations, reasons, empirical or theoretical arguments, especially with regard to different standpoints, opposing views and objections challenging their beliefs, is a crucial aspect of moral disagreement and common sources of mutual misunderstanding or apparent futility of lengthy debates which seem to achieve a very little – if any – progress towards a conclusion being shared and genuinely accepted by all parties involved.

Moral philosophers sympathetic to the rationalist models of moral judgement are inclined to assume that attentive, sensible, well-meaning people ordinarily respond to reasons and are compelled to revise their beliefs by logical arguments and factual evidence. Yet, people's capacity to engage in an impartial examination of reasons and ideas, as well as their rational receptiveness to presented arguments, remain

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[145] See John M., and Stephen P. Stich, "As a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114-152, and Joshua May, Joshua May, "Empirical work in moral psychology," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy online*, ed. by Edward Craig (Taylor and Francis, 2017), https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/moral-psychology-empirical-work-in/v-2.

[146] See, for example, Daniel Kahneman and Cass R. Sunstein, "Cognitive Psychology of Moral Intuitions," in *Neurobiology of Human Values: Research and Perspectives in Neurosciences* (2005): 91-105.

largely a conjecture which does not seem to match the reality of many persistent disagreements even among presumably well-meaning and reasonable people, let alone those whose willingness or ability to participate in a fair, rational debate is questionable at best.

Scepticism regarding the role of reason in production of moral views and people's capacity to rationally engage with their moral beliefs was expressed by many famous philosophers such as David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche.[147] Such sentiments regarding human cognition were echoed by various influential psychologist, some of whom arrived at even more radical conclusions, notably Sigmund Freud or Karl Lashley, who claimed that "No activity of mind is ever conscious."[148] Indeed, it is unclear that one is ever fully conscious of the activity of internal reasoning rather than of some of its intermediate and final upshots. To be sure, people are conscious of (aspects of) the external discussions or arguments in which they participate, and they can consciously imagine participating in such discussions. But that is not to say that they are conscious of the internal processes that lead them to say what they say in those discussions. Similarly, people can consciously and silently count from 1 to 5 without being able to be conscious of the internal processes that produce this conscious sequence of numbers in the right order.

Philosophers, especially in the Western tradition, have typically leaned towards deductive reasoning as a method of justification of various conclusions and theories, being taken up in an effort to form an unassailable argument based on logical reasoning, consistency and systematicity. Deductive reasoning and logical reasoning have been seen as a solid ground for the process of rationally justifying one's claims, examining conflicting views, resolving disputes or ambiguities, and so on. Its prominence in modern philosophy is closely related to the rise of analytic philosophy in the past two centuries. It is understandable, as deductive reasoning entails a higher degree of epistemic certainty – generating beliefs which a person has no rational grounds for doubting – and overall higher chances of reaching reliable and rationally sound conclusions. The role of deductive reasoning, which had been already formative in the leading normative moral theories, namely deontology and consequentialism, was even reinforced by the

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[147] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* II. 3.3; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. For further discussion on Nietzsche's moral psychology, see Brian Leiter, *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 67-79.

[148] Karl S. Lashley, "Cerebral Organization and Behavior," in *The Brain and Human Behavior*, Vol. 36, ed. H. C. Solomon, S. Cobb, and W. Penfield (Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins, 1958), 4.

spread of analytic philosophy, which found its natural expression in the field of metaethics as the study of moral thought and language.[149]

Although nowadays analytic philosophy is perhaps not as dominant in academia as it used to be, its tenets have had significant influence over the present-day approach to philosophy, particularly with regard to the most common philosophical methods of inquiry, which still prefers to design and evaluate arguments based on classical deduction. We should note that philosophical favouritism of deductive reasoning commonly involves – implicitly or explicitly – theoretical assumptions concerning human capacity of reason and a model of universal human rationality. These assumptions are subsequently manifested in the views on the normative force[150] of reflective thinking and deductive reasoning.

The crucial question is – in the light of recent findings in moral psychology, suggesting that our moral reasoning is susceptible to various biases and subconscious influences - whether the reasoning process can be purged from these biases and provide a reliable basis for forming conscious and fully-informed moral judgements. Since external arguments are expressed in words, imagined arguments will be imagined as expressed in words. This does not imply that internal reasoning is itself ever in words as opposed to being reasoning about something expressed in words and does not imply that internal reasoning is ever conscious. When theorists refer to "conscious reasoning," they may be referring either to such externally expressed or imagined arguments or to other upshots of internal reasoning. Recently, philosophers like Gibbard and Scanlon argued that moral thinking is concerned with finding ways of acting that can or could be justified to others. In that case, internal moral reasoning might always involve thinking about external moral reasoning to others and so might always or typically involve conscious envisioning of external reasoning. But the internal reasoning processes about such external reasoning would not be conscious, i.e. people would not be aware of them.

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[149] Notable exceptions include proponent of various forms of moral noncognitivism such as emotivism, championed by A. J. Ayer (*Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936) and Charles L. Stevenson (*Ethics and Language*, 1944), or more recent *expressivist* theories (sometimes also called 'quasi-realism'), proposed for example by Simon Blackburn (*Ruling Passions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) or Allan Gibbard (*Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a contemporary overview of main non-cognitivist theories, see van Roojen, *Metaethics*, 141-172.

[150] See, for instance, Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 17-20, 46; Derek Parfit and John Broome, "Reasons and Motivation," 99–146; for a critical discussion, see Jonathan Way, "Two accounts of the normativity of rationality," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2009): 1-3, and Nicholas Shackel, "The Normativity of Rationality," *Teorema: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 34, no. 2 (2015): 167- 189.

The Challenge from Moral Psychology

The empirical findings in moral psychology[151] seem to challenge the classical conception of reasoning. It suggests that moral reasoning seems to function as a means of communication and persuasion, but overall, it does not lead to reliable epistemic outcomes. As Mercier and Sperber write, "[moral] reasoning does not lead to more accurate beliefs about an object, to better estimates of the correctness of one's answer, or to superior moral judgments. Instead, by looking only for supporting arguments, reasoning strengthens people's opinions, distorts their estimates, and allows them to get away with violations of their own moral intuitions."[152] If the empirical accounts of moral reasoning are correct, they have rather significant implications for both metaethical and normative moral theories. The implications are that the role of rational thinking in moral inquiry is severely overestimated. First, it suggests that moral judgments do not correspond with our ordinary non-moral beliefs, as they are – fully or mostly – grounded in the affective or conative states of mind, meaning that rather than conscious, explicit cognition, they derive from intuitive or subconscious mental processes (hence, in metaethical terminology, they consist in 'non-cognitive' states of mind).

Second, it implies that people's ordinary moral judgements are often unjustified or flawed, because they were not established by a proper, controlled method of reasoning, or even by conscious evaluation. This makes them potentially inconsistent and generally unreliable. For this, moral reasoning *does not* resemble logical problem-solving or mathematical operations. When people become aware that their initial judgements might be flawed, they try to rationalize them, but quite often they sacrifice the need for consistency or sound justification – possibly due to the complex framework of multiple factors participating in formation of particular moral views (for example, the evolutionary and societal factors, or involuntary emotional responses) – and insist on validity of their original intuitive judgements. Alternatively, people dig in their heels and their effort to rationalize and justify their basic moral intuitions

[151] For a more detailed review of recent empirical research and psychological accounts of moral reasoning, see Appendix (The Psychology of Moral judgement).
[152] Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, "Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory," *Behavioral and brain sciences* 34, no. 2 (2011): 68.

turns competitive, leaving purported truth-tracking aims of moral inquiry aside.[153] These psychological mechanisms affect even the experts, i.e. moral philosophers, to such an extent large enough to consider moral intuitions *as well as* more reasoned beliefs unreliable in terms of their justification, and hard to change, at least in response to rational persuasion and *interpersonal* reasoning. And third, following from the previous two points, due to the nature of individual moral judgement, interpersonal reasoning and its effectiveness is severely limited. This implies that actual moral disagreement is unlikely to be resolved, mostly due to the factors associated with the shortcomings of human moral psychology.

If moral judgements are in most cases rooted in cognitive processes and influences which are not directly observable, or of which people have no conscious awareness, they are also mostly intractable through reason and rational assessment. Such a perspective on moral psychology, combined with widespread differences in moral views and practices among people, implies that moral views are rationally and normatively incommensurable, at least in the sense presumed by moral objectivism or universalism. This is because the chances of optimal epistemic conditions ever being obtained are severely lessened in the light of scientific research on moral cognition, rendering the convergence claims of moral realist highly conjectural, based on speculations about the rationality of moral judgement which turn out to be inconsistent with the empirical knowledge of human psychology.

The advocates of moral realism dispute the depth of actual disagreements and attribute it to various biases and other cognitive shortcomings, defusing the empirical arguments by considering moral disagreement between people whose judgement is not distorted by these factors. Metaethical debate thus shifts from the problem of *actual* disagreement to the *hypothetical* one, but even in hypothetical situations, the epistemic standards the realists set are potentially too strict, unattainable for ordinary people and seemingly incompatible with the human condition. This in turn makes the realist arguments less effective, as it is intended to counter the sceptical arguments against the existence of stance-independent moral facts, but at the same time it raises doubts about actual epistemic accessibility of said moral facts, failing to provide an adequate response to the challenges posed by *actual* disagreement overall. One might question the credibility or relevance of the realists' conjectures if they turn out patently incongruous with people's moral experience. It is not clear if the realist conditions of full, or at least sufficient rationality.

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[153] Peter H. Ditto, David A. Pizarro, and David Tannenbaum, "Motivated Moral Reasoning," in *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, Vol. 50, ed. Daniel M. Bartels, Christopher W. Bauman, Linda J. Skitka, and Douglas L. Medin (Burlington: Academic Press, 2009): 307-338 (for a discussion of the implications for contemporary moral inquiry, see pp. 332-334).

Most people are not likely to meet such requirements, with a possible exception of few individuals or perhaps a reliance on some sort of artificial intelligence, which would exclude the majority of people from moral inquiry. This does not seem to be consistent with the universalist conception of morality[154] and the prospects of achieving a convergence of moral views. If these limitations apply to a significantly large number of people, we cannot actually speak of the possibility of genuine moral convergence. If the empirical findings in the field of moral cognition are mostly accurate, it amplifies the empirical challenge to moral realists, as the findings seem incompatible with the realist conception of epistemic accessibility of stance-independent or non-naturalistic moral facts. Furthermore, it points out that the applicability of logical reasoning in rather limited as a method for resolving interpersonal disagreements over moral issues. Although it also suggests that moral cognition is not as unique as some philosophers might have thought, which – depending on the interpretation – could be seen as an observation supporting the antirealist account of moral thought or being compatible with some types of moral realism, especially the naturalistic theories of morality, but the realists in general might also exploit it as a point in favour of their defusing explanation of moral disagreement involving the analogy between disagreements in moral and non-moral fields of inquiry. What is more important, however, is that if moral reasoning, as well as reasoning *about* morality, is indeed motivated type of reasoning, it seems to have significant bearing on reliability of contemporary philosophical inquiry. It calls into question the supposed self-evidence of rational intuitions on one hand, while undermining the effects of inferential justification strategies in moral disagreement.

Philosophical Relevance of Empirical Research

[154] Unless academic moral philosophers want to appropriate moral knowledge only to themselves (a very limited number of people) and exclude the rest of humankind. If moral philosophers are willing to do so and label the majority of people as 'irrational', they should also call them 'immoral' (or 'morally ignorant', which is arguably less controversial a claim), because they effectively remove them (as relevant participants) from the field of moral inquiry. This is, however, *inconsistent* with the basic tenets of modern moral universalism, which attributes the capacity of rational thought and moral personhood to *all* people, not only to those recognized as 'fully rational', unbiased, or intellectually competent.

Philosophical arguments drawn from the empirical research in moral psychology have been criticized[155] by the advocates of moral realism as premature, unsubstantiated, or overestimated with regard to their relevance and purported metaethical and normative implications. The replies and objections fall roughly into three broader categories: (1) arguing that empirical data has little significance for moral philosophy, (2) disputing the application of empirical data, which includes *methodological* issues and objections concerning the *interpretation* of data, and (3) suggesting a refined method of moral inquiry which would be immune to various psychological shortcomings revealed by empirical studies of moral judgement.

Some moral philosophers may disagree with scientists and those philosophers who are sympathetic to the use of empirical scientific research in moral theory, arguing that empirical research has little or no bearing on moral philosophy because one cannot derive normative moral claims from descriptive (empirical) premises. This is a traditionally prominent view among moral philosophers who often point out that ethical claims cannot be reduced to factual (descriptive) claims because ethics involves an action-guiding aspect, something that descriptive facts typically lack. As Selim Berker puts it, "either attempts to derive normative implications from these neuroscientific results rely on a shoddy inference, or they appeal to substantive normative intuitions (usually about what sorts of features are or are not morally relevant) that render the neuroscientific results irrelevant to the overall argument."[156]

The objections rejecting the relevance of empirical research for *philosophical* inquiry are, however, problematic. They either associate scientific theories with normative moral naturalism[157] or insists that ethics and science are to be separated and ethics should be isolated from the influence of empirical research. The latter would amount to a claim that moral theory is the subject of armchair philosophy, mostly theoretical or speculative approach, which does not have much to do with *actual* moral practice and related empirical phenomena.

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[155] See, for example, Thomas Nagel, "You Can't Learn About Morality from Brain Scans: The problem with moral psychology," *The New Republic*. November 2, 2013, https://newrepublic.com/article/115279/joshua-greenes-moral-tribes-reviewed-thomas-nagel; Selim Berker, "The normative insignificance of neuroscience," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2009): 293-329; Joyce, "Metaethics and the Empirical sciences," 133-135.

[156] Selim Berker, "The Normative Insignificance of Neuroscience," 294.

[157] As, for example, Sam Harris does in *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010). But Harris's account of morality hardly represents all – or perhaps even most of – scientific approaches to moral inquiry (see, for example, Jonathan Haidt, "Why I think Sam Harris is wrong about morality," *The Righteous Mind*, February 9, 2014, https://righteousmind.com/why-i-think-sam-harris-is-wrong-about-morality/).

To lessen this worry, we shall consider that the primary objective of metaethics is to examine the nature of moral thought and language, to inquire into the ontology of moral facts and epistemological questions pertaining to the knowledge of such facts, as well as justification of moral claims. However, metaethics is not predominantly occupied with presenting normative claims; it studies their meaning rather than arguing what people morally ought to do, hence, the Is-Ought problem does not concern metaethical inquiry, or it pertains to it to a much lesser degree compared to normative ethics.[158]

This does not rule out the normative questions altogether, but in metaethics, those questions are closer to the issues concerning epistemic justification and normative rationality, i.e. being focused on the question whether some (moral) beliefs, as well as some beliefs about the nature of morality, are more justified or reasonable, and how should we rationally approach moral discourse and inquiry, i.e. the questions which are also the main subject of this paper.

The questions concerning the actual role of moral reasoning, the underlying cognitive processes, as well as the external influences such as social factors, are addressed and explored by empirical sciences, which are arguably better equipped to do so than impression and generalized observations by moral philosophers. Philosophers who wanted to introduce an empirical assertion about the social world, for example, as a starting point of their analysis or to support their arguments,[159] have traditionally relied on their subjective observations of the world and human interaction, on unexamined assumptions about morality (such as that it is good or necessary for humans to function properly).

Yet, while philosophers may appeal to their own intuitions, or consider intuitions which are widespread and generally undisputed, they cannot fully substitute the rigorous and systematic approach of empirical science, which bases its claims on gathered data and relies on careful methodology rather than naïve observation. It does not mean that scientific theories and conclusions derived from the empirical data

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[158] Some, like Richard Joyce, claim that the Is-Ought problem does not apply to metaethics at all; see Joyce, "Metaethics and the Empirical sciences," 133. It can be however expected that not everybody shares this view – especially when it comes to a criticism of naturalistic moral realist and G. E. Moore's famous open question argument (commonly associated with the *naturalistic fallacy*).
On the other hand, some authors, notably Peter Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions," *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 331-352, argued to the contrary, i.e. that empirical findings *do in fact have normative significance*.

[159] Consider Plato's *Republic* I, Hume's *Treatise*, Sidgwick's *Methods*, or more recently, Stevenson's *Ethics and Language*, Mackie's *Ethics*, and Parfit's *On What Matters*, just to name a few examples. This approach is well illustrated by Parfit's introduction in the very first chapter of *On What Matters*, Vol. 1, 31: "We are the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons. […] Reasons are given by facts […]," moving on to proclaim that "One example is the thought that we always have a reason to want to avoid being in agony." Parfit naturally wants to link the introductory claim about reasons to his overarching thesis concerning normative reasons and his concept of non-naturalistic normative facts).

should be left unchallenged. Various theories and hypotheses can be tested and examined, not only those introduced by the researchers, but also those put forward by moral philosophers. In this way, empirical science can aid philosophical analysis of important topics and philosophers can examine and elaborate on empirical findings.

Although there are moral philosophers who hesitate to recognize empirical findings as a legitimate source material for further philosophical inquiry, others emphasized their relevance and usefulness in providing informational value as regards descriptive accounts of the world and human nature.[160] These philosophers include metaethicists from both camps, moral realists and anti-realists. Peter Singer, who represents the realists, believes that recent research in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience has also normative implications, particularly with regard to reliability of our moral intuitions. Singer supports the application of empirical findings, concluding that "research in the neurosciences should therefore lead us to reconsider the role of intuitions in normative ethics."[161] Not everyone shares this view, but Richard Joyce, a moral error theorist, expressed his belief that "empirical data—including that of a neuroscientific nature—will impact on a number of metaethical issues. My guess is that the greatest contribution will be to moral epistemology, though perhaps in ways that will be found unsettling," while adding that "neuroscience and social psychology have revealed moral deliberation frequently to be clouded by emotion (even in cases when we wouldn't ordinarily think so)—so this is an instance of empirical data having a direct metaethical pay-off."[162]

While drawing normative moral claims from empirical evidence is philosophically problematic, I contend, empirical research can aid metaethical inquiry by helping philosopher to better understand the nature of moral judgement and the operational processes of moral reasoning. In this sense, empirical research might have relevant and philosophically potent metaethical implications, but also normative

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[160] For a further discussion, see Joshua Knobe, Wesley Buckwalter, Shaun Nichols, Philip Robbins, Hagop Sarkissian, and Tamler Sommers, "Experimental Philosophy," *Annual review of psychology* 63 (2012): 95-99.

[161] Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions," 331.

[162] Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," 388.
Joyce also refers to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, who argued that "that empirical psychology reveals many moral judgments to have attributes that, by ordinary epistemic standards, render them in need of independent confirmation." Regarding the implications of recent research in moral psychology, Joyce points out that "this would amount to an empirical confirmation that moral judgments satisfy Sinnott-Armstrong's final criterion [of judgments requiring independent confirmation]: of deriving from 'an unreliable source.'" For this, see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology," in *Metaethics After Moore*, ed. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 343-346.

implications, not in terms of morality, but in terms of rationality.[163] Empirical sciences may thus significantly contribute to metaethical inquiry, even if only indirectly, providing a valuable input to philosophical debates concerning empirical phenomena, such as moral disagreement or psychological processes involved in moral reasoning.

Alternatively, moral realists might focus on pointing out *methodological issues* or presenting empirical counterevidence. These objections address potential issues in methodology and research design of some of the frequently cited studies. Methodological counterarguments suggested that some of the data might not accurately measure what they proclaim to measure, or that the sample size is too small or narrow, or that the experimental design of particular studies does not inform us about moral judgements in real-life conditions, which are usually more ambiguous and less 'sterile' (being isolated in a lab), often include practical reasoning (not only speculations), or do not involve as extreme or epistemically explicit cases as some of the psychological studies did. This critique was commonly directed towards the studies involving evaluation of various moral dilemmas, such as Greene's research and a number of other neuropsychological studies.[164]

Some commentators argued that the conclusions presented by researchers do not always follow from the empirical data. It might be the reason why many of academic philosophers are somewhat wary of empirical science and how it might affect the field of ethical inquiry. Seasoned philosophers like Thomas Nagel or Richard Joyce[165] tend to curb the enthusiasm of moral psychologists and naturalistically oriented philosophers, cautioning against hasty conclusions and overgeneralizations pertaining to moral theory, particularly with regard to the efforts to vindicate or undermine certain metaethical theories such as

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[163] What I mean by this is not how people 'ought to reason' to get to justified moral truths, but rather putting various conceptions of rationality and reasoning into perspective, i.e. reconsidering what it means to be 'rational about morality', that is, reaching meta-normative conclusions about the rationality of moral inquiry insofar as they involve our rational reflection on the empirical account of formation of moral judgements and moral reasoning and the relationship between rationality and morality. This is an important difference from the approach endorsing normative claims about maximizing rationality in moral inquiry, like Singer or Greene do, aiming at revising our moral judgements and the process of moral reasoning to be more rational and satisfy the requirement of rational justification.

[164] See, for example, Guy Kahane, "Sidetracked by trolleys: Why sacrificial moral dilemmas tell us little (or nothing) about utilitarian judgment," *Social neuroscience* 10, no. 5 (2015): 551-560.

[165] Nagel, "You can't learn about morality from brain scans", and Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," 385-390.

emotivism and rationalism.[166] To that effect, Joyce warns against appealing to empirical research in order to refute moral rationalism, pointing out that the "empirical evidence may refute Psychological Rationalism [the view concerning the source of moral judgment, i.e. deriving from one's rationality, being reached by a process of reasoning and reflection] – and neuroscience may contribute to its downfall—without this in any way compromising the moral rationalist's project of finding a rational foundation for ethics [read normatively, as concerning the principles that underwrite and justify the contents of moral judgments, regardless of the causal source of those judgments]."[167]

While this points out mistaken application of empirical findings on metaethical theories, recent empirical studies were also criticized for methodological issues.[168] These issues ranged from experimental design, hypothesis testing, to theoretical framework used for interpretation of the data. The latter consists in misrepresenting the two major approaches in normative reasoning, namely, consequentialism and deontology, not only by simplifying them, but also rather arbitrarily ascribing each to a particular type of brain activity – the first being classified as 'rational', the second as involving 'affective' cognitive activity) while they seem to be far more complex and intertwined.[169]

It could be also argued that the research design of the studies in question omitted potentially relevant variables. For example, some of the studies focused primarily on moral dilemmas which, one might argue, are border cases and do not accurately represent reasoning about moral issues in the real-life settings. The lack of testing for non-morally relevant factors (or irrelevant non-moral factors affecting moral judgement) calls into question some of the general conclusions about moral judgements.

The methodological objections, however, might prompt empirical researchers improve their methods and design new studies. In response to the empirical studies of moral judgement interpreted in favour of moral non-objectivism or antirealism, a number of researchers[170] designed alternative studies and presented empirical counterevidence challenging the conclusions and theoretical accounts unfavourable to moral

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[166] These suggestions are often seen as implicated by the works of Jonathan Haidt, Joshua Greene (see, for example, Jonathan Haidt and Joshua D. Greene, "How (and where) does moral judgment work?" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 12 (2002): 517-523), or Jesse Prinz, "The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgements," *Philosophical Explorations* 9, no. 1 (2006): 29-43).
For a critique of such conclusions, see Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," 374-9.
[167] Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," 387.
[168] Leland F. Saunders. "What is moral reasoning?," *Philosophical Psychology*, 28, no. 1 (2015): 6.
[169] See Guy Kahane, "Sidetracked by trolleys," and Berker, "The normative insignificance of neuroscience," 307-8.
[170] For example, Thomas Pölzler and Jennifer Cole Wright, "An empirical argument against moral noncognitivism," *Inquiry* 66, no. 6 (2023): 1141-1169, or Joshua May, "Moral rationalism on the brain." *Mind & Language* 38, no. 1 (2023): 237-255.

realism. These studies presented evidence either in support of the traditional philosophical conception of moral reasoning or suggested that rational evaluations have a considerable – or sufficient – influence on moral judgments and reasoning.

The criticism of well-known empirical studies is valuable, as it highlights a significant contribution from moral philosophers who carefully examine the empirical data and critically review scientific theories, as it helps to reveal potential flaws and inconsistencies. For instance, based on a critical review of recent empirical studies, Thomas Pölzler proposed four general requirements for science-based arguments in order to provide meaningful contributions to the moral realism – anti-realism debate.[171] It may compel the researchers to consider alternative methods, gain a new perspective and investigate further to gather more evidence, which can help them to revise (or defend) their empirical accounts of morality.[172] However, empirical research can be considered as a relevant source of empirical data for moral philosophy, especially with regard to the theories committed to particular claims concerning sociological phenomena and human psychological processes.

[171] Thomas Pölzler, "Can the Empirical Sciences Contribute to the Moral Realism/Anti-Realism Debate?," *Synthese* 195, no. 11 (2017): 4907–30.

[172] A great advantage of the approach informed by available empirical findings is that it enables people to revise their views based on new evidence, and incorporates standardized steps (e.g. testing, revising, and expanding our theories) to deepen and expand on descriptive accounts of moral psychology.

V. MINDING THE GAP: MORAL INTUITIONS, EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION AND RATIONAL DISAGREEMENT

The empirical accounts of moral psychology suggest that there is a gap in our reasoning. This gap is justificatory, as it pertains to the difficulty of justifying moral beliefs which rely on our intuitions. There also seems to be an explanatory gap with respect to people's individual reasoning, interpersonal reasoning and its supposed connection to discovery of stance-independent moral facts. In response to the empirical challenge from moral psychology, moral realists have argued that a refined method of moral inquiry would be instrumental in overcoming various cognitive shortcomings distorting people's moral reasoning.

There is a relative consensus among philosophers that some version of wide reflective equilibrium is our best method of moral inquiry.

However, because the reliability of moral intuitions as a source of objective normative reasons is seriously undermined, Singer asserts that it challenges the method of reflective equilibrium, one of the dominant approaches to justification of universal moral beliefs in contemporary ethics.[173] Singer endorses his preferred alternative, i.e. moral theory based on 'reason alone'. This approach fits well in the rationalist tradition represented by Kant, Sidgwick, Parfit, and others. However, the empirical challenge from moral psychology renders problematic not only overall reliability of moral intuitions, but also the objective rationalism that Singer supports.[174]

Epistemic Justification and The Question of Reliability

This argument consists of two layers: one pertains to actual moral disagreement and the problem of resolving persistent disputes about moral matters, while the other concerns disagreement *about* how to resolve moral disagreements in general**.** The main claim of the argument is that if our justification methods

[173] Singer, "Ethics and intuitions." 345-352.
[174] Joakim Sandberg and Niklas Juth, "Ethics and intuitions: A reply to Singer," *The Journal of Ethics* 15, no. 3 (2011): 209-226.

purporting to validate moral beliefs turn out to be inadequate, it gives us reason to suspect that moral beliefs cannot be sufficiently justified, which undermines the realists' commitment to the accessibility of objective moral knowledge. The fact that there is no generally accepted or agreed method of moral inquiry might lend support to the claim that our methods of justification are inadequate for their purpose.

The realists invoking the notion of ideal epistemic conditions argue that under such conditions – typically involving us being aware of all relevant non-moral facts and overcoming any cognitive shortcomings – moral disagreement would be rationally resolved, and widespread convergence of moral views would ensue. The present lack of agreed upon method for resolving moral disputes challenges these hopes, suggesting that even under the epistemically most favourable conditions, i.e. among the people who are generally considered rational, well-informed about relevant non-moral facts, and epistemic peers, disagreement would prevail. Suppose that there was a universally accepted and apparently reliable method of moral inquiry, a method that would be widely believed to be the best one for the purpose of resolving moral disagreements and facilitating widespread convergence in moral views.

The worry is that if the best available method – a method for discovering moral truths that have the best claim to being justified – is applied impeccably by many people, but a large number of them still arrives at different conclusion and disagreement prevails, the method itself turns out be unreliable. Moreover, in such a situation, the method would not be considered unreliable only for the purposes of interpersonal reasoning, but – unless we could confidently point out a flaw in the method's application by the others – we would have little reason to consider it a reliable source of moral knowledge even for our own use in *intrapersonal* reasoning.

The argument against the reliability of the method asserts that in moral inquiry, people may arrive at different conclusions and hold views which are *prima facie* justified and logically consistent, yet incompatible with each other and entailing disagreement. Hence, it is not the mere absence of a method as such, because there is a number of prominent justificatory methods in moral philosophy, which we will consider shortly. Nonetheless, philosophers seem to disagree on what the best method for solving moral disagreement is. This problem is not unique to moral disagreement, as it involves more general epistemological problem of disagreement. Some realists[175] argued that the methods which are normally used to resolve moral disputes

[175] For example, Russ Shaffer-Landau writes: "Disputes within ethics seem structurally to be quite similar to those within philosophy generally. Disagreement about the morality of abortion or euthanasia seems as intractable as that which separates

correspond to the methods used to resolve other types of disagreement within philosophy. Philosophical argumentation relies on various devices and techniques such as conceptual distinctions, thought experiments, analogies, counterfactuals, as well as appeals to intuitions, the elenchus (Socratic method), and so on. In spite of the common usage of these philosophical tools, many disagreements prevail. For this reason, the antirealists' reasoning should either consider all these philosophical devices unreliable as a justified method of settling disagreements, implying epistemological scepticism about philosophical knowledge in general, or concede that their argument does not entail moral antirealism. As Shafer-Landau puts it, "If the argument from disagreement is sound, then this should lead us to an antirealism about all philosophical views.... For the features that are used to generate a kind of skepticism about morality's status are shared by disagreements in all areas of philosophy."[176]

This alludes to the so-called 'companions in guilt' argument,[177] invoking an analogy between moral and non-moral disagreements and making a claim that sceptical arguments from disagreement would generalise to other relevant fields of inquiry – for example, an argument concerning moral judgements seems to be linked to an analogical argument about epistemic judgements (making them 'companions') – hence entailing a broader epistemic scepticism. This, the advocates of this objection argue, is a reason to reject the argument from moral disagreement, as it is plausible that its sceptical conclusions would generalise to another domains.[178] It seems disproportionate to maintain that moral scepticism entails, for example, mathematical scepticism or full-fledged epistemological scepticism, but it is what upholding the argument from disagreement apparently requires, which is a reason to reject it because it undermines its credibility and potentially its soundness. Moreover, the antirealist should reconsider their conclusions about moral knowledge, as it seems unlikely that it is their intention to appeal to moral disagreement to argue that *all* knowledge should be deemed unjustified, and the methods of non-moral philosophical inquiry are unreliable.[179] A similarly constructed objection to the argument from disagreement contends that the

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nominalists from Platonists, theists from atheists, foundationalists from coherentists, libertarians from compatibilists…" See Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*: *A Defense*, 220.

[176] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense*, 220. David Enoch makes a similar point, noting that if disagreement should really undermine the justification of moral beliefs due to a lack of a *justified method* to confirm or revise them, it would let moral realists maintain their views only "at the price of a rather extreme skepticism". See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 35-36, 47.

[177] See Christopher Cowie and Richard Rowland, *Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 5-6.

[178] See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 47.

[179] Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An argument for moral realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122. Cuneo uses Mackie as an example of this apparent discrepancy.

argument might be self-defeating, as there is widespread disagreement about moral realism. If widespread disagreement about moral facts is indeed a compelling reason to deny moral realism, the advocates of this line of reasoning might inadvertently commit themselves to a denial of realism about moral realism within the metaethical debate, hence undermining their own argument.[180] It seems that the antirealists need to revise their original argument or provide some further details to shows why disagreement in a problem specifically for *moral* realism.

Such objections, however, are perhaps relevant to the original argument from disagreement, which can be understood as resting on a rather crude description of moral disagreement and, on the realists' interpretation, seems to appeal primarily to the phenomenon of disagreement to infer that the best explanation of its persistence is provided by the antirealist view on the existence of the subject matter of said disagreement, i.e. stance-independent moral facts. Such an account of intractable disagreement is more specific regarding the peculiarity of moral thought, reformulating the challenge to moral realism with respect to apparent unreliability of moral judgements and the methods of moral inquiry. But there is no reason to believe these bounds of reasoning apply equally to more complex concepts, higher-order theories and speculative studies, or philosophical disputes about non-moral matters, as in most cases they involve the matters of theoretical inquiry, abstract domains (such as mathematics), or natural philosophy (which usually pro-empirical and do not necessarily rely on our intuitions or common sense,[181] or are generally quite willing to admit or consider the inputs from empirical studies (natural philosophy epitomizes this approach).

There is also empirical evidence supporting these claims,[182] including the aforementioned research suggesting that philosophers (as the experts in the field of moral theory) are not immune to various underlying psychological factors underlying the processes of moral reasoning, or that they are at least

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[180] See Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 47-48.

[181] For a contemporary discussion on *metanormative* aspects of this debate, see Anders Hee Nørbjerg Poulsen and Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen, "The Invention and Re-invention of Meta-ethics" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (2023). Cf. David Enoch, "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How best to understand it, and How to cope with it," *Philosophical Studies*: *An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 148, no. 3 (2010): 413-438.

[182] See, for example, Thomas Pölzler; Eric Schwitzgebel; Jonathan Weinberg. For the shortcomings of moral intuitions and the difficulty to achieve coherence in moral beliefs, see Horvath and Wiegmann, "Intuitive Expertise in Moral Judgements," 342; Daniel Kahneman and Cass R. Sunstein, "Cognitive Psychology of Moral Intuitions," in *Neurobiology of Human Values: Research and Perspectives in Neurosciences* (2005): 91-105. For a study concerning specificity of *practical* reasoning and the concept of 'bounded rationality', see Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science* 211 (1981): 453-458, as well as Ditto, Pizarro, and Tannenbaum, "Motivated Moral Reasoning," 302-336.

significantly less susceptible to various cognitive biases and framing effects associated with moral cognition compared to laypeople.[183]

A more sophisticated versions of the argument against moral realism might focus on the problematic features of moral disputes and stresses the epistemological challenge to the realist position, considering intractable disagreement simply as a symptom of these problems. The epistemological challenge concerns the inability of methods of moral inquiry to provide a sufficient justification to moral beliefs. In the previous chapter, we reviewed a range of psychological factors involved in the formation of moral judgements and undermining reliability of our basic moral intuitions. These influences – regardless of them being interpreted as inherent to people's moral thought or mere distortions of it – influence interpersonal moral reasoning to such a degree that it gives us a reason to doubt the possibility of widespread convergence or reconcilability of different moral claims and viewpoints. This is especially true with regard to justification of particular idiosyncratic moral beliefs, but it applies to the philosophical methods generally utilized for the purposes of epistemic justification as well. In what follows, I focus on the two main approaches to justification in moral epistemology, namely, foundationalism and coherentism – to illustrate the implications of empirical work in psychology and neuroscience for these methods.

As a part of moral inquiry, philosophers rely on standards of epistemic justification, and while epistemological theories differ in multiple aspects, they typically appeal to people's basic moral intuitions or involve them in some other sense. Some approaches, characteristically moral intuitionists, take basic intuitions to be justified non-inferentially, i.e. independently of inference from other beliefs.[184] This is a part of more general strategy of epistemological foundationalism, a view holding that a justified belief is only if the belief is justified non-inferentially justified *or* inferable from non-inferentially justified beliefs.[185] In order to stop the sceptical regress regarding moral beliefs, moral intuitionists employ non-sceptical foundationalist conception of moral beliefs. However, empirical works in moral psychology indicate that, generally speaking, our moral judgements would require an independent confirmation in order to be

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[183] See Jonathan M. Weinberg, Chad Gonnerman, Cameron Buckner, and Joshua Alexander, "Are philosophers expert intuiters?," *Philosophical Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2010): 331-355.

[184] Sinnott-Armstrong refer to these approaches as to moral intuitionists, classifying as such not only rational intuitionists, but also moral sense theorists and reliabilists. See Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral intuitionism meets empirical psychology," 342.
An example of contemporary version of ethical intuitionism is presented and defended by Michael Huemer, see his *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 99-127. See also Michael Huemer, "There is no pure empirical reasoning," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95, no. 3 (2017): 608-611.

[185] Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral intuitionism meets empirical psychology," 340.

considered an acceptable source of non-inferentially justified beliefs. Drawing on an analogy with similar non-moral beliefs, Sinnott-Armstrong formulates the following principle: "confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the belief arises from an unreliable or disreputable source."[186] Empirical psychology suggests that our intuitions are unreliable, hence, they are in need of such independent confirmation. The problem is that, on the intuitionist view, the basic moral intuitions cannot be confirmed inferentially, nor can we confirm them empirically.

Another dominant method of justification in moral epistemology is coherentism, holding that a belief is justified if it goes well with other held beliefs, all of which form a coherent doxastic set.[187] The best-known example of a coherentist type of justification is the method of reflective equilibrium,[188] and it seems that many philosophers believe that some version of wide reflective equilibrium is our best method of moral inquiry.[189] However, because the reliability of moral intuitions as a source of objective normative reasons is seriously undermined, Singer asserts that it challenges the method of reflective equilibrium, as it relies on people's moral intuitions as initial 'inputs'.

Due to various non-rational factors influencing the formation of moral beliefs and attitudes, some of which might be based on internal influences, such as emotions and heuristics, and some might be external, such as heterogenous cultural practices or of the evolutionary background, the justification produced by the method of reflective equilibrium is arguably very fragile,[190] if not outright unreliable. Even if we take into account the distinction between "narrow" reflective equilibrium, i.e. reflecting on only how individual current views fit together, and "wide" reflective equilibrium, which involves various other views and the arguments that might be given for them with the goal of avoiding undesirable effects associated with general availability of relevant data and the order in which one gets evidence or considers a problem,[191] it does not fully solve the abovementioned issues of employing reflective equilibrium as a universally reliable

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[186] Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral intuitionism meets empirical psychology," 345.
[187] Joyce, "Metaethics and the empirical sciences," 146.
[188] See Daniels, "Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics," 256-282.
[189] Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," 366, 378-379.
[190] Harman, Mason, and Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Reasoning," 239-240.
[191] Singer, ""Ethics and intuitions," 347, and Horn, "Moral Realism, Fundamental Moral Disagreement, and Moral Reliability," 379.

method of discovering moral knowledge or justifying moral judgment,[192] especially in cases of interpersonal disagreement.

The suspected arbitrariness of common moral judgements – and their connection with subjective intuitions, prompted rather strong criticism of the method of reflective equilibrium, especially by some proponents of moral objectivism. Singer argued that due to various psychological and evolutionary factors affecting people's intuitions and moral judgements, reflective equilibrium does not provide a reliable method for a sound moral justification, and called for a method that would give priority to more reasoned conclusions over common moral intuitions, invoking Kant's claim that morality which is not based on pure reason is an illusion.[193] Singer endorses moral theory based on 'reason alone', advocating a method of 'more reasoned conclusions'.[194] This approach fits well in the rationalist tradition represented Sidgwick, Parfit, and others. Yet, it suffers similar difficulties as the method of reflective equilibrium which Singer criticizes. Reflective equilibrium relies on our 'considered moral judgments'. As Tersman writes, "the considered judgments of a person are, roughly, those that are held with some confidence, not distorted by self-interest and prejudice, and based on well-grounded information and sound inference patterns."[195] This is very similar to Singer's preferred approach – and it suffers from the same difficulties, namely, it relies on our own beliefs and intuitions as starting points of our moral inquiry. However, as research in empirical psychology suggests (and to which, ironically, Singer appeals when questioning the reliability of reflective equilibrium), our moral intuitions problematic, prone to various biases and order effects. The challenge seems to apply to Singer's notion of foundationalist justification just as much as to reflective equilibrium. Both approaches are vulnerable to various debunking explanations, such as the evolutionary background or sociocultural factors, which can explain different moral intuitions without postulating that they provide u with knowledge of independent moral reality.

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[192] Note that John Rawls originally did not intend to use reflective equilibrium in this way, for Rawl's considered reflective equilibrium as an aid to practical reasoning with regard to a successful application of his political theory.
[193] Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions," 347, 349-51. Cf. Sandberg and Juth, "Ethics and Intuitions: A Reply to Singer," 217-221.
[194] Singer, "Ethics and intuitions." 350.
[195] Folke Tersman, "The Reliability of Moral Intuitions: A Challenge from Neuroscience." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86(3): 398.

Emphasizing these psychological features of moral reasoning is, on this reading of the antirealist challenge, what sets apart *moral* disagreement from *philosophical* disagreement[196] and enables the antirealists to put forward the arguments appealing to moral disagreement which does not commit them to an overall scepticism or antirealism about the realism debate in metaethics, avoiding the worry that the argument from disagreement is self-defeating.

The Partiality Problem

In his comprehensive review of the variety of arguments from moral disagreement, which generally raises a number of insightful questions and relevant objections, David Enoch frequently points out an issue which is somehow emblematic of the realist-antirealist debate. Enoch argues that many will find the arguments compelling mostly due to their preconceived opinions corresponding with antirealist inclinations. Such people will likely find the premises of the arguments acceptable due to their partiality, while the others – particularly those sympathetic to moral realism – have no reason to accept them.[197]

Although it is debatable whether no one[198] who approaches the debate with a reasonable degree of rationality, fairness and open-mindedness could find the arguments compelling, unless they already are

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[196] Of course, not all psychological features of moral reasoning are unique specifically to moral judgements, and moral antirealist might happily concede that there are subfields of philosophical inquiry which are more vulnerable to the arguments from disagreement, as they face the same (or very similar) difficulties due to the psychological processes involved in disagreements about their subject matter. In addition to ethics, it might also concern aesthetics, politics, or religious disputes, to name the most obvious candidates (for empirical studies suggesting their similarities with moral reasoning, see the works of Jonathan Haidt or Eric Schwitzgebel). It is likely that many moral antirealists would not strongly oppose the objection that the argument from disagreement commits them also to antirealism in said areas of philosophy, or a broader epistemological scepticism (while maintaining that it does not necessarily entail extreme scepticism or a denial of realism about the relevance of philosophical inquiry in general).
Although this position *prima facie* requires a commitment to scientific realism (as it relies on findings provided by empirical sciences) or empirical positivism, it is not necessarily, as there are types of scientific antirealism – for example, Van Fraassen's *constructive empiricism* (Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) or various forms of social constructivism – which still accept empirical findings as a relevant source of information about the world, albeit with an important reservation that the aim of science lies not in getting us closer to truth about what the world is like, nor is it in providing an in warranting not to in science does not warrant the continuance of our knowledge of the natural facts or its gradual expansion, only in making us less wrong and providing us with empirically adequate theories.

[197] Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?," 35.

[198] As a former staunch defender of moral realism, I can attest that as a matter of fact, at least *some* who have no previous antirealist inclinations indeed do find the premises of antirealist arguments compelling. Moreover, the realists seem to rely on the controversial notion that moral realism somehow corresponds with common sense and people are moral realist by default.

partial to antirealism, Enoch's observation is important because it arguably works – in many cases – in both directions, i.e. it applies to philosophers from both camps. An antirealist might similarly argue that the realists accept particular premises and find certain arguments compelling because of their prior partiality to the realist views. On the other hand, those who do not have such inclinations to moral realism might not have reason to accept the premises in question.

This issue pertains to the subject of partiality and cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias. While most philosophers, Enoch included, would likely agree that philosophical method aspires to be as unbiased as possible and assumes fair and impartial assessment of ideas and arguments, it raises a question as to what extent this involves realistic expectations or presents an ideal of philosophical inquiry. Most people embark on the path of philosophical inquiry having already adopted many conventional beliefs and unprobed views before, but at least since the times of Socrates and his followers, it is thought to be a sign of genuine philosophical endeavour to be able to examine various ideas, challenge our preconceptions and views we unwittingly adopted, for example, owing to social conformity and unquestioned acceptance of our naïve observations.

Raising the partiality question in this context is problematic for the adherents of either camp in metaethics because it puts in the spotlight the question of rationality and reliability of philosophical method in general. It might be argued that cognitive biases affect one's reasoning inadvertently and implicitly, while partiality can be also understood as an explicit factor. Not only that it should be revealed upon reflection, provided a basic degree of sincere soul-searching and self-awareness, but philosophical debates obviously encourage taking a stand on an issue, and lead to maintaining and defending one's position, hence, partiality. To form an opinion philosophically presupposes that people would engage in the process of rational assessment, overlooking another intellectual activity, which from the outside closely resembles the first one, namely, the process of rationalizing one's intuitions and preconceived notions. It is difficult to distinguish one from another, beside else because maintaining one's supposedly reasoned out position requires a certain degree of confidence in one's own beliefs or intuitions, including the conviction that they are not the ones produced by rationalization.

Perhaps it is the case for those who rely fully on their intuitions about the truth of our empirical discovery of the world – which is true at least throughout our childhood – but once people start wondering and examining or revising some of their earlier intuitions, the 'realism by default' is not so definite. The claim is problematic, for example, in the light of their recurrent complaints about naïve relativism maintained by many undergraduate philosophy students.

Should philosophers proactively seek to mitigate or eliminate their partiality, thus undermining their confidence in validity of their arguments and conclusions? Given the complex nature of the human mind and moral thought, which of the cognitive processes involved in moral reasoning constitute potential intellectual shortcomings and are to be understood as biases distorting faultless rational procedure, hence should be disregarded, avoided, preferably rooted out or otherwise disposed? I believe these questions have some serious weight and there is little agreement upon the answers even among moral realists, let alone moral philosophers in general. It poses a serious problem, particularly with regard to disagreement between epistemic peers. There is a reasonable worry that in case of seemingly faultless disagreement, our confidence that a particular belief is justified should diminish.

Underdetermination of Moral Theory

There is another problem associated with moral disagreement based on differences in background theory favoured by the interlocutors. This kind of disagreement is both normative, as well as metaethical. Different metaethical theories entail different views on the questions of normativity of moral claims.[199] The proponents of various anti-realist theories will construe moral normativity in quite a different sense compared to moral realists. This is not to say that all of them outright reject all normative components of moral beliefs, but they will understand them *differently* than moral realists, and approach them accordingly. It applies not only to the advocates of non-cognitivism, who have no reason to try to dispose or reduce normative (or prescriptive) aspects of moral language,[200] but even to a number of moral sceptics such as the error theorists who endorse treating present moral rules and standards in practice *as if* they were true.[201]

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[199] For now, I put aside alternative, non-moral conceptions of normativity such as legal or rational normativity.

[200] Some anti-realists (such as expressivists) are in this sense also what Gibbard calls "normative realists", Allan Gibbard, "Parfit on Normative Concepts and Disagreement," in *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*, ed. Peter Singer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 74.

[201] For example, Jonas Olson, an error theorist, suggests that even though Moral Error Theory is true, i.e. there are no moral facts in the strict sense and all first-order moral claims are uniformly false, but people should – in terms of their day-to-day life – just continue believing that there are moral facts. See Jonas Olson, "In Defence of Moral Error Theory," in *New Waves in Metaethics*, ed. by Michael Brady (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65-7.
Other philosophers also consider potential usefulness of fictitious and illusory beliefs. For example, Saul Smilansky argued in favour of a view he called "free will illusionism", according to which free will and moral responsibility do not exist in the

Regardless of important theoretical differences within the anti-realist camp, what do these theories share is that they do not construe or approach moral normativity in the same way as moral realists, particularly because they do not consider moral claims to be normative in the strict sense, i.e. they reject that that moral claims are normatively true, that is to say that there is normativity based on moral facts and that them being normative is based on them being moral. To reiterate, though, moral anti-realists may happily grant that in terms of our practical application, many attitudes and behaviours which are commonly called moral (or morally right) may well be considered *normative*, but on the grounds different from their putative moral status (for example, they may be considered prosocial or personally advantageous in one way or another).

Moral realists – with the exception of naturalistic moral realists, who identify moral properties with some kind of non-moral properties – quite understandably do not typically accept such a view on the meaning of moral claims. For this reason, the most prominent normative theories are usually associated with moral realism,[202] as they operate with the framework where moral claims are treated as truth-apt, and their overall meta-axiological relevance is not called into question.

PARFIT'S CONCILIATORY PROJECT

The lack of convergence between the proponents of rival theories in normative ethics is another point of concern for moral realists arguing that moral disagreement is non-fundamental and under idea epistemic conditions, people's moral views would converge. Recall Parfit's convergence claim discussed in Chapter 3. Parfit was deeply concerned particularly with moral disagreement among his epistemic peers, i.e. among moral philosophers who appear to be fully rational and are arguably experts in moral theory, yet they still disagree about the basic tenets of normative ethical judgements. He identified and analysed three major schools of thought in moral philosophy, namely Kantianism, consequentialism, and contractualism. His

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metaphysical sense, but the illusion of free will (and moral responsibility) should nevertheless be maintained due to its practical benefits, see Saul Smilansky, "Free Will: From Nature to Illusion." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101: 85-87. See also Thomas Nadelhoffer and Adam Feltz, "Folk Intuitions, Slippery Slopes, and Necessary Fictions: An Essay on Saul Smilansky's Free Will Illusionism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007): 202-6.

[202] This is a common association, although it should be noted that metaethical theories (such as moral realism and anti-realism) and normative moral theories (such as deontology and consequentialism) belong to two distinct fields of moral philosophy, and identifying moral realism with any theory from normative ethics is merely a simplification.

method, Parfit claims,[203] offers a solution to a potential disagreement between the advocates of these approaches.

He goes to great lengths to provide an argument showing that problem can in fact be overcome and a rational convergence among the proponents of competing moral theories is still possible, famously concluding that "It has been widely believed that there are such deep disagreements between Kantians, Contractualists, and Consequentialists. That, I have argued, is not true. These people are climbing the same mountain on different sides."[204] According to Parfit, the only principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally choose would be the those producing the maximum good consequences, or, as he puts it, "would make things go best".[205]

But there seems to be a justification problem. "Consequentialists and Kantians give competing explanations for *why* certain acts are right even if they can agree on which acts are right,"[206] writes Suikkanen in order to illustrate the nature of this problem. Parfit argues that since the competing theories are also the best versions of the most important ethical traditions, at least one of which most experts have thought to be true, it should make us confident that the conclusions we arrive at are also the correct ones.

Still, this suggestion that the competing moral theories may achieve an agreement with regard to their conclusions, and so it is fully reasonable to accept any of them, does not account for the fact that the propositions and explanatory reasons these theories involve are logically incompatible, which means that they undermine each other *and* undermine Parfit's solution concerning their disagreement.[207] As Marius Baumann[208] points out, if it is equally reasonable to believe either of two moral theories, we have no reason to attribute truth to one but not the other. But if two moral theories contain incompatible propositions, they cannot be both true. This also means that if we have no reason to attribute truth to one but not the other, it is not reasonable to consider either of them true. To drive this point home, Baumann asserts that

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[203] Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 444-5.
[204] Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol.1, 419.
[205] Parfit, On What Matters, Vol. 1 (2011), 375. Parfit formulates this as a consequentialist maxim: "everyone ought to follow the principles whose universal acceptance would make things go best."
For a critical appraisal of Parfit's method and his 'triple theory', see Roger Crisp, "Are we climbing the same mountain? Moral theories, moral concepts, moral questions." *Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie* 3, no. 2 (2020): 273-4.
[206] Jussi Suikkanen, *This Is Ethics: An Introduction.* Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
[207] Convergence procedure according to Parfit (*On What Matters*, Vol. 2, 546ff.)
[208] Marius Baumann, "Parfit, Convergence, And Underdetermination," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2018): 208.
Similarly, Dietrich and List consider the underdetermination of moral theory by deontic content, noting that just as scientific theories can be underdetermined by the empirical evidence, moral theories can be underdetermined by their deontic content, see Dietrich and List, "What Matters and How It Matters," 422.

there are alternatives to even our best moral theories that can account for exactly the same evidence while containing incompatible propositions, due to which we have no reason to be believe that either of them is true.

On this view, when it comes to competing explanatory theories, ethics might face a similar problem as modern science.[209] However, I see another analogy here, an analogy from the history of moral philosophy. Parfit's effort to reconcile alternative the three contemporary moral theories with incompatible propositions seems to be done in a similar vein to Sidgwick's endeavour to reconcile ethical egoism and utilitarianism in his *Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick considered the *Methods* a failure because of the 'dualism the practical reason', i.e. the conflict between egoism and utilitarianism that made impossible the development of a 'harmonious system' of ethics. Sidgwick concluded that the two views are logically inconsistent.[210] An egoist, Sidgwick argues, says that she ought to take her own happiness as her ultimate end is immune to any argument from the utilitarian that her own good can be no more important a part of the total good than that of any other, as she will deny that her own good is good 'from the point of view of the Universe'.

Rationally Irresolvable Disagreement

Because disagreement is prevalent even among many experts, who are generally considered to be well-informed, rational individuals, it might be understood as potential evidence[211] that persistent moral disagreement is possible even among optimally rational people and that even though they cannot be convicted of noticeable epistemic errors, they may still maintain different moral beliefs. Mirroring the realist explanations of why moral disagreement is non-fundamental, the following argument takes a hypothetical approach, considering *possible* disagreement instead of *actual* disagreement. To say that

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[209] This refers to the problem from the philosophy of science known as the *underdetermination of theory by evidence*, discussed for instance by Franz Dietrich and Christian List, "What Matters and How It Matters," A Choice-Theoretic Representation of Moral Theories," *The Philosophical Review* 126, no. 4 (2017): 421–79.

[210] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 420-29. See also Roger Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227-9.

[211] For a discussion, see Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence," 756-767.

disagreement is rationally irresolvable means that it would continue even between ideally rational parties,[212] implying that such disagreement is fundamental.

The notion of 'rational irresolvability' might be understood differently. One option is to claim that disagreement is rationally *resolvable* if and only if one of the parties can be shown to be logically inconsistent, while rationally irresolvable disagreement occurs when both positions can be held without logical inconsistency, although they are evidently incompatible. Moral realists could respond that this framing of the conditions for rational resolvability does not seriously undermine the credibility of realism, because of the way they conceptualize true moral beliefs. In addition, they might appeal to an analogy with our understanding of the non-moral facts about the world, pointing out that people maintain various logically consistent views which are almost universally considered untrue, although they can be logically consistent.[213] But people do not typically view scientific disagreements as rationally irresolvable simply because there is a possibility of maintaining two incompatible views or theoretical accounts without logical inconsistency.

On the other hand, if we have a very strict view of rational resolvability so that any mistake at all in any sense counts as a rational flaw, a disagreement is rationally resolvable whenever either party can be shown to have made any kind of error. In that case it seems that rationally irresolvable disagreement would challenge realism, as it would mean that if moral disagreement would not be resolved after a thorough check for rational errors, it should be considered rationally irresolvable.

Yet, the realist will object that moral disagreements are not rationally irresolvable. For the realist, at most one of the positions is correct and the other is not, so at least one of the parties to the debate must

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[212] The argument can be read as relying on a strong claim involving any moral judgement, directly supporting the antirealist challenge to moral realism. If only some moral disagreements were rationally irresolvable, it would follow that the other moral disagreements are rationally resolvable and one could maintain that moral beliefs in such cases are justified, which would paradoxically give support to moral realism.
Still, another reading of this argument involves a more moderate claim aiming to challenge moral realism indirectly. On this reading, some moral judgements are rationally irresolvable, and all moral judgments are open to rationally irresolvable disagreement *within the moral realist framework*. This poses a potential challenge for the realist epistemology.
If there is some rationally irresolvable disagreement, it might undermine our confidence that other cases of disagreement can be rationally resolved. It may also support the antirealist explanations of particular cases of apparent moral agreement (which might be explained by non-rational factors, e.g. evolution or social factors).

[213] Consider examples from other fields such as science or natural philosophy, such as a geocentric system of planetary motion or the Flat Earth theories. These used to be dominant views in the past, and it is still possible to maintain them without logical inconsistency, provided that one disregards all the empirical evidence contradicting them.

have made a mistake of some sort. The strict view of rational resolvability would either involve a circular argument against the realism (presupposing that existing disagreement implies its irrationality) or it would mean that moral realist can claim that if there is a disagreement, at least one of the parties is rationally flawed and the disagreement is rationally resolvable.

Still, moral realism faces an explanatory challenge. First, in spite of maintaining that one of the positions is correct and the other is not and taking disagreement as evidence that one of the parties committed some rational error, the realist needs to explain how we know which of the positions is justified, or at least more credible, if no obvious rational mistake can be pointed out. Suppose that it often appears that a moral disagreement is rationally irresolvable, meaning that sometimes it appears that two people can disagree about a moral issue without either of them exhibiting any cognitive shortcomings. The realist will need to explain why moral disagreements seem to be rationally irresolvable if in fact they are rationally resolvable, and it might be argued that the antirealists can give a better explanation of this appearance. This is a variation on the argument from disagreement appealing to the inference to the best explanation.

Furthermore, there appears to be a difference between moral disagreement and non-moral disagreement in the fact that other fields may appeal to other ways of resolving their disagreement, for example, by seeking independent confirmation.[214] There are cases of prevailing theoretical disagreement among scientists in which neither party seems to be guilty of logical inconsistency or making rational error. Recall Baumann's claim that metaethical and scientific disagreement cases are vulnerable to the *underdetermination* problem[215] – the key difference seems to be in the normative and practical aspects of moral beliefs, so the scientists can content themselves with merely speculative approach or seek independent confirmation by the means of empirical research, the moral realists need to provide a compelling explanation as to how we justify our moral beliefs with the absence of any independent confirmation or a reliable method of determining whether or not moral beliefs based on our intuitions are

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[214] Considering empirical evidence that our intuitions are unreliable in many circumstances, people should also seek inferential confirmation of our moral intuitions. These intuitions are often used as starting points of moral inquiry regardless of such confirmation. This is particularly problematic for moral inquiry relying on the process of reflective equilibrium.
For a critical examination and discussion of the claims that the method of reflective equilibrium either would provide a route to moral objectivity only by undermining its own methodological commitments which separate it from foundationalist approaches to moral justification such as intuitionism, see Sem de Maagt, "Reflective equilibrium and moral objectivity." *Inquiry* 60, no. 5 (2017), 443-455.

[215] This argument is inspired by the problem of underdetermination in philosophy of science. For a review of the scientific problem of underdetermination, see Seungbae Park, "Philosophical Responses to Underdetermination in Science," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 40, no. 1 (July 2009): 115–24.

true. Moral realism committed to the view that moral facts are stance-independent is faced with the question of possible confirmation of our intuitive beliefs, as we do not have any direct perception of the moral wrongness of an action,[216] nor can we base moral wrongness on empirical research, for example, by measuring our brain activity.

The argument from disagreement might be used in this manner not as a direct argument against realism, but rather as an attempt to undermine realist epistemology, posing an epistemological challenge for moral realism. The antirealists can argue that moral disagreement, as a common empirical phenomenon, challenges not only the metaphysical status of stance-independent, but also that we do not have a reliable way of knowing which moral facts are objectively true, thus we are not justified in regarding our moral beliefs so. According to the antirealists, non-objective character of moral properties is the best explanation accounting for the continuous occurrence of moral disagreement among people. Although the advocates of moral realism might insist that persistent, even irresolvable disagreement is not incompatible with the notion of objective moral facts, the lack of reliable and generally accepted method of justification would call into question the possibility of moral knowledge, undermining moral epistemology associated with the objectivist theories, especially one of its core tenets of non-sceptical cognitivism, namely, the truth aptness of moral claims. If people's knowledge of moral facts remains generally obscured, it is indeed unclear why moral objectivity should matter to us in the first place, as this approach seems to naturally heads towards the state of suspension of judgement (*epochê*), corresponding with the philosophical tradition of ancient scepticism.[217]

But moral realism does not commonly involve epistemological scepticism, nor does it aim to allow for it. It asserts not only the existence of universal moral facts, but also their *epistemic accessibility* to people by the means of moral inquiry.[218] Hence, a moral realist needs to respond to the challenge of disagreement by

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[216] Perhaps just with the exception of our subjective emotional states (guilt, shame, disgust, anger) and reactive attitudes which are merely subjective and would make the tracking process of moral wrongness arbitrary. The same can be said about the possible confirmation – social validation, i.e. the approval of other people.

[217] Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, 10-11.

[218] There are some differences in their (moral realists') position on the question to what extent are moral facts available to everyone, or even ordinary people, who are mostly rational, yet do not have philosophical expertise in the matters of ethical inquiry. Some philosophers suggested that proper moral knowledge to its full extent is in fact available only to a limited group of people – trained ethicists, i.e. the experts in moral philosophy, who use their expertise and rational approach to scrutinize common moral intuitions of ordinary folk in order to pan off the true moral facts from mere customs and prejudices. This view is famously endorsed by Plato in *The Republic*, but it also has prominent modern heirs, for example – as a slightly modified version endorsed by Henry Sidgwick, who criticizes apparent lack of methods and principles in Plato's theory of obtaining the knowledge of true Good, but agrees with him in somewhat elitist approach to moral epistemology, noting that the task of

proposing a method of overcoming it or putting forward a comprehensive argument explaining the reasons why moral disagreement is compatible with its core thesis about the nature of morality.[219]

The realists owe us an account of how exactly we can justify our moral beliefs - in particular, how is it exactly that moral beliefs come to track the moral facts. It is worth noting that this is a challenge regardless of moral disagreement. Even if everybody shared the same moral views, we could still ask this question and it would still be an important problem for realism. Nevertheless, widespread moral disagreement amplifies this challenge and provides some empirical support for it. The available empirical data suggest that moral judgments are susceptible to framing effects and various biases[220] and people often fail to realize and correct inconsistency in their beliefs or incoherence of their arguments, while also struggling to appreciate the opposing views accurately and assessing them fairly and impartially.[221] Moreover, this seems to apply even to professional philosophers or other 'moral experts'.[222] If these empirical findings are right, it follows that our moral intuitions are deeply problematic as a reliable source of justification for our moral beliefs, that moral disagreement is extensive and intractable, and that the nature of moral reasoning renders our chances of resolving actual disagreement by the rational means slim, it seems that the hopes for widespread moral convergence not substantiated. Furthermore, the explanatory accounts of moral anti-realists seem to be better suited – in terms of their explanatory power and congruence with the non-moral beliefs about the world – to explicate the character of moral disagreement and why it is not merely superficial.

Perhaps the realists could still somehow salvage their position, appealing to epistemically ideal circumstances and a vision of the best method of inquiry. After all, such a widely accepted method is at least conceivable. Still, if we could apply such a method flawlessly, it is possible that it would not reconcile rival positions such as egoism and utilitarianism, individualism and collectivism, or consequentialism and deontology, rendering it ultimately unreliable. The realists would likely object that the shortcomings of our present methods do entail a denial of the existence of stance-independent moral facts, nor does it rule out a possibility of widespread moral convergence.

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philosophers is "more than define and formulate the common moral opinions of mankind… [it] is to tell men what they ought to think, rather than what they do think […] to transcend Common Sense". Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics,* 373-6.

[219] See Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 289, 304. Williams writes "That would be a structure very different from that of the objectivity of science. There is, then, a radical difference between ethics and science. Even if ethics were objective in the only way in which it could intelligibly be objective, its objectivity would be quite different from that of science. In addition, it is probably not objective in that way." (Williams, "The Scientific and The Ethical," 304).

[220] For example, Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology," 339-365.

[221] See Mercier and Sperber, "Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory," 68.

[222] Horvath and Wiegmann, "Intuitive expertise in Moral Judgments," 342-359.

For this reason, I believe that the most potent version of the argument from disagreement consists in the epistemological challenge to moral realism, combining the methodological challenge and the problem of rationally resolvable disagreement. If a broadly accepted method of moral inquiry was designed and employed under epistemically favourable circumstances under which people would be aware about all relevant non-moral information, it is still possible that the complex nature of moral judgement would not allow us to apply it flawlessly, or it would it rely on unreliable inputs in the form of our basic moral intuitions, rendering its results unreliable. The hypothetical account of possible disagreement under optimal epistemic conditions, I contend, is relevant only insofar as it is indeed *possible* and does not deny the inherent features of humankind, including our psychology. Moral realists seem to consider various cognitive processes underlying the formation of moral judgement as mere distortions or biases which should be eliminated but does not take into account that some of these psychological processes might be inherent to our moral thought. Subsequently, the realists' notion of 'full rationality' appears to dehumanize idealized moral inquiry, portraying the ideal reasoners as someone lacking distinctive qualities of human psychology.[223]

Even though Parfit – unlike Sidgwick – believed that his theory solves the problem of disagreement between fully rational proponents of competing moral theories, I am sceptical in this regard, as the fundamental premises of these theories are incompatible with each other. Considering that these premises are an integral part of the explanatory reasons these normative theories endorse, it is not clear why a fully rational proponent of one particular view should have a reason to consider the arguments of the rival theories equally sound and compelling as his own, even if they sometimes arrive at the same conclusions. As might be expected, this issue becomes even more pronounced reasoning involving metaethical disagreement, be it the general dispute between moral realists and anti-realists, or more particular questions such as whether moral terms represent cognitive or conative states of mind.

Taking Moral Disagreement Seriously

Is descriptive pluralism of moral views and the prevalence of interpersonal disagreement something that corresponds with commonly held intuitions about the nature of morality, or do these phenomena

[223] A similar argument could involve people who are able to fly, have telekinetic powers, or are immortal. These are interesting thought experiments, but it can hardly suffice as a plausible response to, say, the question of determinism or the concept of just war.

contradict them? In spite of the significant cultural changes that took place during the second half of the 20th century, I believe that many would argue that moral pluralism and moral disagreement defy our common moral intuitions about the nature of morality. How about philosophical conclusions based on critical analyses which took into account these widespread phenomena, namely the plurality of moral views and the prevalence of disagreement? Again, I believe that many – particularly the advocates of moral realism – would be inclined that such philosophical conclusions about the nature of morality are rather counterintuitive.

It is somehow ironic that moral realists like Peter Singer or Derek Parfit, who – explicitly or implicitly – endorsed Sidgwick's view that philosophy ought to challenge common presuppositions[224] also subscribe to moral realism. Why is it ironic? Because their intention is to challenge common moral intuitions that people largely share, but the very notion of objective moral values and universal moral principles which these thinkers often invoke in support of their preferred conceptualization of the nature of morality is arguably based upon such intuition. This intuition might be rationally reflected and modified, but the basis of moral judgement – especially with regard to folk moral beliefs – seems mostly intuitive rather than rational.[225]

While moral realists sometimes distinguish between philosophically relevant, 'rational' intuitions, and 'unsubstantiated intuitions' of folk morality, it is still unclear whether they can exclude them and try to find a purely rational basis of epistemic justification. It seems especially problematic if they advocate the view that moral truths are objective and epistemically accessible to all people.[226] Moreover, in response to the challenge from the argument from disagreement, some proponents of the non-naturalist version of moral realism[227] suggested that the argument is begging the question against moral realism. But this objection appears to be deeply unsatisfactory, as it essentially shifts the burden of proof to moral anti-realists instead

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[224] "[Philosopher's] function is to tell men what they ought to think, rather than what they think," Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 373-4; see also similar claims by Peter Singer in Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions," 331-2, 349.

[225] It is important to note that even pre-adolescent children are capable to articulate many common moral judgements (Kohlberg, Turiel, Smetana). Some studies (e.g. Tiziana Zalla, Luca Barlassina, Marine Buon, and Marion Leboyer, "Moral judgment in adults with autism spectrum disorders," *Cognition* 121 (2011): 115-26) suggest that this applies even to people with intellectual disability whose capacity of reasoning is impaired.

[226] Singer in "Ethics and Intuitions," 349-51, maintains that normative ethics does not need to rely on common moral intuitions. He seems to accept Sidgwick's concept of 'rational intuitions' (see *The Methods of Ethics*, 382-90) but it is unclear how he wishes to separate the two types of intuitions in philosophical ethics, let alone various conflicting views in folk moral discourse.

[227] This objection is repeatedly invoked for instance by David Enoch, "How is moral disagreement a problem", 34-5, 41, 47-8.

of providing a proper argument for the existence of objective moral truths, as well as explanation why fundamental moral disagreement prevails and how to overcome it.

Moral objectivists generally seem too content with relying on empirical observations of common intuitions about the objective nature of moral claims, which – according to them – are shared by most people.[228] It is not controversial as a starting point or a backdrop of philosophical inquiry into morality. However, it is problematic if it is used as a response to another empirical observation, namely the phenomenon of moral disagreement (about particular moral judgements, but also about the overall nature of moral principles). It is so, because it could be argued that many moral realists beg the question of moral objectivity in the same way that their opponents tend to do the opposite.[229] If one side argues that the significance of moral disagreement (or other empirically derived claims about morality, for instance empirical research in moral cognition) is overestimated, the other side may argue the same about common intuitions about the nature of moral judgements and putative prevalence of the belief that some (at least some) moral statements are objectively true.

These lines of reasoning seem to have repeatedly reached a dead end. It is not clear whether developing a more rigorous methods or more complex philosophical arguments will help to make some progress in the dispute between moral realists and anti-realists. The problematic nature of this dispute does not imply moral scepticism – be it the Pyrrhonic or Academic kind of scepticism about moral knowledge and moral objectivity – but it seems to support it as a feasible, clear-cut and possibly the most honest response to the apparent impasse in contemporary metaethics. Furthermore, it is unclear whether more elaborate argumentation and more complex philosophical theories will have any bearing on the practical domain, i.e. folk moral disagreement and ordinary moral reasoning. It seems unlikely that philosophical theories relying mainly on the power of rationality, logical argumentation and the notion of objective morality will be very successful in such endeavour.

The problem of moral disagreement and the empirical challenges it entails nonetheless provide a valuable opportunity for a philosophical reconsideration of the conception of normativity and rationality in moral inquiry, which may even entail an alternative way of addressing the phenomenon of practical moral

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[228] Cf. Christian B. Miller, "Moral Relativism and Moral Psychology," in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. S. D. Hales (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 346-367; Godfrey P. Goodwin and John M. Darley, "The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism," *Cognition* 106, no.3 (2008): 1339-1366.
[229] Enoch, "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism," 47-8.

disagreement – one that will take into account the available empirical knowledge, existing normative theories, but also the intersubjective basis of moral values and the limits of interpersonal moral reasoning. Needless to say, this endeavour would require further work in moral theory, as well as further empirical research and a closer collaboration between moral philosophers and empirical scientists.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore the phenomenon of moral disagreement and its place in contemporary debates in metaethics. I considered the problems persistent moral disagreement poses for moral realism and the notion of moral objectivity. I was particularly concerned with the question of objective moral knowledge and the epistemological challenges associated with disagreement. These challenges pertain to epistemic justification of moral beliefs in the face of apparently intractable disagreement, especially if such disagreement involves epistemic peers.

Moral disagreement is thought to present a challenge particularly to moral realism. I considered the defusing explanatory accounts of disagreement put forward by moral realists, as well as why these explanations and arguments do not shelter moral realists from the antirealist charges, as they seem to inadequately address the problem of *actual* moral disagreement and practical implications, failing to account for its depth and complexity, which is why I believe that they fall short of providing a sufficient defence of the realist conception of morality. I specifically focused on the *epistemological* aspects of the challenge in an effort to show the epistemological issues persistent moral disagreement yields, particularly for non-naturalistic moral realism.

Furthermore, I reviewed and discussed empirical works in moral psychology, as well as their potential implications for moral philosophy in general, and metaethical inquiry in particular. I considered a large body of relevant empirical evidence which contradicts some of the intuitions about the nature of moral judgement and moral reasoning processes which have been confidently asserted as true by various moral philosophers and utilized as underlying assumptions for their metaethical arguments. These "armchair intuitions" about human moral psychology and rationality of moral judgement, having been implicitly accepted or categorically stated, remained largely unexamined and unchallenged for a long time, even though there are essentially empirical matters, as they involve claims pertaining to moral thought and moral language of ordinary people.

As I have argued, the epistemological variation of the argument from disagreement brings forth a potent and arguably the most formidable challenge to moral realism. In particular, the persistence and of moral disagreement, combined with empirical research indicating the limitations of moral reasoning and fallibility of people's moral intuitions, gives rise to sceptical questions concerning epistemic accessibility of stance-independent moral facts and reliable justification of moral beliefs.

However, I contend, moral philosophy is not merely an armchair discipline, and relevant empirical claims should not be immune to testing, nor should moral philosophy disregard inputs and suggestions from empirical sciences. I have tried to show that many of these philosophical assumptions about moral psychology do not correspond with available empirical data, and that psychological accounts of moral judgement seem to undermine the empirical conjectures of moral realism, rebutting the rationalist assumptions embedded in the convergence claim and derange the realists' optimism for rational convergence of moral views. These suggestions are not to be taken lightly or brushed off, appealing to "unique status of moral philosophy".

It is not because the best explanation of existing moral disagreement is that there are no stance-independent moral facts. The mere existence of disagreement does not entail that moral realism is false, I readily concede this much. Nonetheless, our chances of ever knowing those moral facts, or of providing justification of moral beliefs *qua* representational beliefs about the true state of the world, are in fact rather slim. It is fair to note that only fundamental moral disagreement, i.e. disagreement that would be unresolved even under epistemically ideal conditions, being ultimately explained by systemic differences in people's moral intuitions, provides a decisive argument against moral realism. Yet, since its provability is contingent upon the occurrence of epistemically ideal conditions,[230] it seems unlikely that we would be able to attain conclusive evidence, at least empirically, that would show that actual moral disagreement is also fundamental.

Although this makes supposed fundamentality of disagreement hardly provable (or disprovable), I have argued that we have good reason to believe that disagreement would prevail *even* under epistemically ideal conditions and with appropriate use of the best method of moral inquiry people have. This reason is based on (1.) our current empirical knowledge of moral reasoning and limitations thereof, as well as general fallibility of individual intuitions, and (2.) shortcomings inherent even in our best methods of moral inquiry, as they are dependent on human input – on our intuitions, which are problematic and prone

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[230] Which seems to be hypothetical, idealized situation, at least on the realists' view maintaining that such ideal conditions are qualified by perfect rationality (or 'elimination cognitive shortcomings') of the participants. As I noted earlier, this is a very strict interpretation of rationality, as it seems that is does not allow for influences of any kind of subconscious and uncontrolled cognitive processes, as any of that could be potentially interpreted as bias or distortion of logical thinking. I would argue that it is highly improbable to achieve such a state, and likely impossible for an ordinary human being. Epistemically ideal conditions thus defined, I contend, are merely hypothetical – nearly unattainable, albeit conceivable.

to error, hence undermining the subsequent inferential processes and rendering the method unreliable and problematic as a tool to impartially evaluate evidence and arrive at justified conclusions. On the other hand, it seems that we do not have sufficient reason to believe that the conjectures supporting the realist account of possible widespread moral convergence and rationally resolvable disagreement are true. The realists' argument concerning moral disagreement and epistemic accessibility of moral facts *under* such and such conditions, which may never actually materialize, provides a fragile, if any, support to their position, and is underwhelming and dissatisfactory as a response to the challenge from disagreement.

While moral realists tend to draw analogies between moral and scientific disagreement, I believe that a more suitable analogy would be based on religious disagreement, as – to some extent – the existence of objective, non-natural moral facts seem to be a matter of faith. The epistemological challenge of disagreement, I believe, concerns actual, real-world disagreement, and the problems with epistemic justification of moral beliefs. I explained that this challenge is further amplified by empirical works in moral psychology, which cast doubt on the reliability of moral intuitions, as well as the methods of moral justification, as in most cases, they depend on people's intuitions in some way. It was not the main objective of this thesis to present a conclusive argument for or against a particular metaethical position. Nonetheless, I contend, moral disagreement remains a significant problem for moral realism, and in light of the empirical accounts of moral psychology, the prospects of widespread rational convergence of moral views are rather bleak. The empirical limitations of human reasoning create an explanatory and justificatory gap, undermining the prospects for rationally justified knowledge of objective moral facts, as well as a chance of rational resolution of persistent moral disagreements. In other words, moral disagreement is likely to prevail – and, being aware of its complexity, including the limits of moral reasoning between people, we should mind the gap it creates.

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Appendix

The Psychology of Moral Judgement

The purpose of this section is to review recent empirical work in moral psychology and its potentail relevance for moral philosohy. Moral philosophers disagree over the question whether moral disagreement can be resolved by reasoning and rational argumentation, which could subsequently support a method for dealing with persistent moral disagreements and achieving convergence in moral views. Moral theories often involve assumptions about the nature of moral judgement and the role of reason in moral inquiry. In the past, philosophers sometimes argued in support of their claims with reference to particular examples (resembling case studies, although these examples were typically used mainly for illustrative purposes, to reinforce the main argument[231]) instead of providing a systematic analysis of empirical observations. This is, after all, considered to be the approach applied in sciences.

For a long time, the claims referring to human psychology were rather speculative, as this field was scientifically less approachable than the external, physical world. But the rapid expansion of psychology as a scientific discipline over the course of the 20th century has changed this. Empirical research in psychology and cognitive science provided systematic accounts of mental processes and included various areas of human cognition, inter alia, moral reasoning and the cognitive mechanisms of moral judgment. Empirical research can thus assist moral philosophy and illuminate the nature of moral reasoning and support or challenge some of empirical conjectures associated with metaethical and normative theories.

A number of psychological studies over the past twenty years focused on moral reasoning and moral behaviour suggest that affective states and implicit cognitive processes[232] play a significant role of in forming moral judgment, being not merely a correlative of moral judgement, but rather the cause of people's reactive attitudes commonly recognized as reasoned views, 'moral beliefs', or 'moral intuitions'. In fact, besides accentuating the influence of emotion and intuitive cognition, many researchers have argued that conscious, rational reflection is less relevant to moral reasoning than it has been traditionally assumed by moral philosophers, as well as the older psychological theories associated with the so-called rationalist tradition.

Among the most prominent contemporary empirical accounts of moral psychology is Jonathan Haid's *social intuitionist model* of moral reasoning.[233] Haid summarizes the main findings of his long-term research in moral psychology by the following three principles: (1) Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second, (2) Moral reasoning involves more than general questions regarding harm and justice/fairness, and (3) Morality is strongly related to multiple phenomena of social psychology, particularly tribalism and partisanship in

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231 Philosophers like David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, or John L. Mackie can be mentioned as good examples of this approach.
232 Unconscious or subconscious cognition, see Cushman, Young, and Hauser, "The role of conscious reasoning and intuition in moral judgments," 1082–1089, or Mercier and Sperber, "Why do humans reason?," 57-74.
233 Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814–834.

terms of value preferences and various norms of justification that are (or are not) taken into account.[234] The central claim of Haidt's theory is that emotional intuitions are the basis of most moral judgments. This account of moral judgment suggests that ordinary moral reasoning produces value judgments that are formed and based upon implicit knowledge[235], which also means that they are contingent on social and situational factors perceived by the reasoners. While moral judgements may (or may not) putatively entail express universal principles or objective reasons, the reasoning process operates principally in a subjective manner. In addition to Haidt's research, there is a mounting body of evidence which corresponds with these empirical claims against the traditional 'rationalist'[236] models of moral judgement, and a number of studies which are compatible with Haidt's theory of moral judgement or complementary to it.

For example, Pizarro et al.[237] put forward further evidence supporting the conclusion that people tend to adjust their moral views to rationalise judgments that they have formed beforehand, i.e. before the conscious application of their moral principles and views, which they are subsequently motivated to maintain for the reasons other than simple adhering to those moral principles.

Other researchers argue that emotions play the decisive role only in specific moral judgments (e.g. situations which involve personal instigation of harm), while the judgments involving impersonal stance generally weaken the power of emotive reasoning.[238] Based on a series of neuropsychological experiments designed to examine cognitive processing of moral judgement, which involved monitoring people's brain activity while they were dealing with various moral dilemmas,[239] Joshua Greene and his collaborators proposed a *dual-process theory of moral judgment* which asserts that there are two distinct ways how people arrive at moral judgements, namely to through reason and through emotion. Greene's research suggests that people's moral beliefs are subjected to two different types of psychological processes: explicit,

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234 Jonathan Haidt, "Moral psychology for the twenty-first century," *Journal of Moral Education* 42, no. 3 (2013): 281. See also Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2012), 70.

235 Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail," 830-834.

236 n.b., There is a terminological difference between 'rationalism' in psychology and in ethics, but both of these views emphasize the role of reason over other psychological factors. The difference between the usage in psychology and philosophy is not as significant as in the case of 'intuitionism' (which some philosophers use to the view asserting that rational, *a priori* intuitions are the source of moral knowledge), while in psychology, 'intuitionism' or 'intuitivism' refers to implicit (subconscious) cognition akin to affective mental states. Because the term 'moral rationalism' does not entail such ambiguity, I use it the broader sense, which encompasses the basic definitions used in philosophy and psychology. However, it should be noted that there are also particular theoretical positions labelled as rationalism, which differ in the way they conceptualize the role of reason and rationality in relation to moral judgement. For a detailed discussion on the typology of moral rationalism, see Joyce, "What neuroscience can (and cannot) contribute to metaethics," 376-381, and Michael Smith, "Three Kinds of Moral Rationalism," 48-50.

237 See Ditto, Pizarro, and Tannenbaum, "Motivated Moral Reasoning," 330-338.

238 See Cushman, Young, and Hauser, "The role of conscious reasoning and intuition in moral judgments," 1082–1089.

239 The original research was presented in Joshua D. Greene et al. "An fMRI investigation of emotional engagement in moral judgment," *Science* 293, no. 5537 (2001): 2105-2108. See also Joshua D. Greene, "Why are VMPFC patients more utilitarian? A dual-process theory of moral judgment explains." *Trends in cognitive sciences* 11, no. 8 (2007): 322-323.

deliberate and in-depth thinking (called 'System 1' in the dual-process model of moral reasoning) and intuitive judgement based on intuitive emotional response (called 'System 2').[240]

Greene argues that people who endorse consequentialist judgements are usually guided by deliberate, "rational" reasoning, while people who make deontological judgments mostly rely on their emotional intuitions.[241] According to his empirical findings, intuitive, emotion-based reasoning was linked with deontological views (corresponding Kantian ethics), while deliberate, rational reasoning was more likely to produce consequentialist (particularly utilitarian) judgements. Greene also claims that people's conscious cognitive processes can compete with their emotional responses and even overcome them, which is the case particularly among those endorsing utilitarian views.

The association of deontology with intuitionism is not new, as it dates back at least to Sidgwick, who explicitly identified Kant's ethics as a type of intuitionism.[242] Note however that 'intuitionism' in moral philosophy does not necessarily refer to what modern psychology calls 'intuitive reasoning', although these two approaches may – and in many cases do – overlap. But for the sake of clarity and academic rigour, it should be noted that the way intuitive moral judgements are usually treated in contemporary psychological literature (e.g. Jonathan Haid, Joshua Greene and others) corresponds predominantly with one particular type of ethical intuitionism, namely, moral sentimentalism (also known as 'moral sense theories'). However, since the research has shown that – regardless of the question which type of reasoning corresponds more with deontological or consequentialist views – ordinary moral beliefs are strongly related to emotional processing[243] and that moral judgements are generally subjected to intuitive, emotional responses, most of the researchers involved in this field argued that it undermines the traditional philosophical ('rationalist') model of moral judgement.

A number of moral philosophers agreed that these empirical findings constitute a significant challenge to some of the prominent moral theories, most notably those who appeal to the rational basis of moral views and attempt to find the objective grounds for moral knowledge by the means of the reason alone. Yet, the empirical findings alone seem to be partially open to interpretation. Some utilitarians took it as a support of their favoured ethical theory, arguing that it is preferrable due to its rational basis which can

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[240] Joshua D. Greene, "The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul," in *Moral psychology: Historical and contemporary readings*, ed. Thomas Nadelhoffer, Eddy A. Nahmias, and Shaun Nichols (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 359-64. For an overview of recent empirical research in moral psychology, see Joshua Greene, "The rise of moral cognition," *Cognition* 135 (2015): 39-42.

[241] Jesse J. Prinz and Shaun Nichols, "Moral Emotions," in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. by John M. Doris and the Moral Psychology Research Group (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 116.

[242] In his *Methods of Ethics*, 366, Sidgwick remarks that "[…] this view, which coincides practically with Utilitarianism, would certainly be disputed by most Intuitional moralists. Again, some of these moralists (as Kant) regard all actions as bad or not good which are not done from pure regard for duty or choice of Right as Right: while Hutcheson, who represents the opposite pole of Intuitional Ethics, equally distinguishes the love of Virtue as a separate impulse; but treats it as at once co-ordinate in rank and coincident in its effects with universal Benevolence." Sidgwick thus differentiates between two types of moral intuitionism: one (represented by Francis Hutcheson) maintains that moral intuitions (adhering to one's moral sense) are immediate or instinctive judgements revealing moral character of actions or attitudes, while the other (represented by Immanuel Kant) relies more on rational processing and requires a conscious cognitive evaluation of one's moral intuitions to infer moral principles.

[243] Nichols, "After objectivity," 3-26.

reduced undesired effects of emotional responses, which are essentially subjective. This conclusion has been advocated for example by Joshua Greene[244] himself or by Peter Singer. Singer suggests that the aforementioned findings in experimental moral psychology support his thesis that moral intuitions should play little or no role in adequate justifications of normative ethical positions. Because the reliability of moral intuitions as a potential source of objective normative reasons is seriously undermined, Singer asserts that it challenges the method of reflective equilibrium, one of the dominant approaches to justification of universal moral beliefs in contemporary ethics.[245] Singer endorses his preferred alternative, i.e. moral theory based on 'reason alone'. This approach fits well in the rationalist tradition represented by Kant, Sidgwick, Parfit, and others. However, the empirical challenge from moral psychology renders problematic not only overall reliability of moral intuitions, but also the objective rationalism which Singer advocates.[246]

The 'Reason vs. Emotion' debate

Many of contemporary philosophers acknowledge that emotions play a certain role in moral judgment and moral motivation. Moral emotions[247] such as compassion, guilt, or anger, often accompany moral judgements, facilitate recognition of some actions as morally inappropriate, and usually strengthen perceived righteousness of people's personal views. Moreover, emotions naturally motivate behavioural reactions to actions or events identified with morally significant content, especially when these events involve the matters of personal relevance.[248] However, it is important to distinguish between the two main theoretical frameworks that contemporary philosophers maintain in this matter. Moral rationalists argue that people typically arrive at moral judgements through a process of conscious reasoning. Some of the rationalist philosophers consider the role of emotions, but only as the sources of motivation for people to act in accordance with their moral judgments. Emotions are nonetheless contingent upon the rational evaluation of moral factors. While rationalists may have no problem admit that emotions can influence moral judgements, they would usually identify it as a form of bias that clouds proper judgement, i.e. that negatively affects people ability to rationally evaluate available data and achieve the kind of objectivity required for justified moral judgements. Contrary to this conception of moral thinking, many philosophers (often associated with moral *sentimentalism* or non-rational *intuitionism*, although these labels are very broad) argue that moral judgment is typically produced as a consequence of emotional feelings. A recent example of this model is the aforementioned *social intuitionist* model of moral reasoning.[249] Based on his empirical research, Haidt argues that people do not typically arrive at moral judgments through rational reasoning,

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[244] Joshua. D. Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and The Gap Between Us and Them*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).
[245] Singer, "Ethics and intuitions," 349-352.
[246] Sandberg and Juth, "Ethics and intuitions: A reply to Singer," 209-226.
[247] See Jonathan Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, edited by Richard J. Davidson, Klaus R. Scherer, Harold H. Goldsmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 855, 862.
[248] Joshua D. Greene "Beyond point-and-shoot morality: Why cognitive (neuro) science matters for ethics," *Ethics* 124, no. 4 (2014): 695-726. Cf. Guy Kahane, "Sidetracked by trolleys: Why sacrificial moral dilemmas tell us little (or nothing) about utilitarian judgment," *Social Neuroscience* 10, no. 5 (2015): 551-560.
[249] Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail," 814-834.

but rather through "intuitions", which are described as implicit feelings that lead us to conclude that something is right or wrong.

The interest in possible effects of an emotional state on a subsequent moral judgement led Haidt and his team to a series of experiments[250] to see if they could find any empirical evidence of a general effect of emotional states on people's moral judgement. In the centre of research was disgust as one of the basic emotions, and although the findings revealed quite strong correlation between a variety of moral beliefs and disgust, they eventually abandoned this paradigm after a meta-analysis of disgust-related studies showed that this generalization might be overly optimistic and not universally applicable, hence, irrelevant.[251] As a result, they replaced the original concept of feeling being the determinant of moral judgement with a more general social-intuitionist model in which moral reasoning is grounded in automatic cognitive processes, i.e. influenced by emotive states, but also other implicit mental processes and attitudes, about which are not explicitly considered by a moral appraiser in the first place.[252]

Similarly, Shaun Nichols' theory of "sentimental rules"[253] maintains that healthy moral judgment involves two different components: a normative theory (rules) and systems of emotion. Nichols considers moral cognition as being based on a complex interaction between people's normative theory and our affective reactions. He emphasizes that moral judgements are subjected to complex patters of cognitive processes and argues that researchers and ethicists will never be able to explain the experimental data unless they recognize that *both* of these elements, i.e. normative theory and affective reactions, play an important role in moral thought. While Nichols admits that moral judgments can be generated by either emotional responses or conscious reasoning, he rejects the rationalist thesis that emotions are contingent on the influence of reason. It is not impossible to arrive at a particular moral judgement without emotions, he argues, but it is very unlikely, and it may even indicate potential abnormality or a pathological state of the reasoner.

There are other theories that consider the significance of emotions for moral judgement, either from the functionalist perspective, or as the essential element of moral epistemology (an example of the latter would be Prinz's *moral emotionism*, according to which moral judgments are psychological states that include emotional states as parts, and a judgment would not qualify as moral if these emotional states were absent).[254] Most of such theories correspond with or elaborate on the *Humean Theory of Motivation* (HTM), the view that beliefs themselves do not motivate. According to HTM, a person's motivation always depends on the connection between the person's desires and means-end beliefs (e.g. believing doing X will lead to satisfaction of desire Y), given that desires and beliefs represent distinct cognitive states. Motivation

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[250] Simone Schnall, Jonathan Haidt, Gerald L. Clore, and Alexander H. Jordan, "Disgust as embodied moral judgment," *Personality and social psychology bulletin* 34, no. 8 (2008): 1096-1109.
[251]Justin F. Landy and Geoffrey P. Goodwin, "Does incidental disgust amplify moral judgment? A meta-analytic review of experimental evidence," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*10, no. 4 (2015): 518-536.
[252] Joshua May, "Empirical work in moral psychology," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig (Taylor and Francis, 2017). https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/moral-psychology-empirical-work-in/v-2 .
[253] Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[254] Prinz and Nichols, "Moral Emotions," 114-16.

stems from desires – from mental non-representational mental states (for example, emotions or subconscious inclinations) that are independent of any cognitive belief involved.[255] David Hume famously claimed that reasons are inevitably subordinate to passions,[256] not the other way around. HTM in combination with Hume's notion of instrumental rationality (also called '*Humean Theory of Reasons*', HTR), i.e. the view that a person's reasons depend on the actual desires the person has, entail that no reason or belief can motivate by itself, but only in relation with a corresponding desire.[257] The claim that desires (associated with emotions or 'passions') are necessary, should one's reasoning be also motivating, intersects with our discussion concerning the emotional background of moral reasoning. Recent empirical studies in moral psychology seem to be largely in agreement with the Humean account of reasoning and moral judgement.[258]

Desires and emotions are essentially subjective, but as we have seen, their role in forming moral judgements does not necessarily undermine any validity of individual moral reasoning. If the models of moral reasoning inspired by the Humean views are correct – as the discussed empirical findings apparently suggest – the moral theories relying on the rationalist conception of moral reasoning, according to which reason provides the path to true moral knowledge and well-reasoned, calcualted judgements are superior to intuitions and affective cognition, are hardly tenable. Individual moral judgements may be rationaly sustained nonetheless, as long as they are coherent with one's affective states and subjective desires. But givent the cultural diversity and plurality of values within humankind, as well as various social factors, subjective preferences, and subconscious influences, it is hard to imagine how this would transcend individual moral judgements and create a foundation for some sort of universal moral knowledge,[259] let alone its questionable reliablity as a method of discovering stance-independent moral facts.

How do these observations relate to the problem of moral disagreement? Given the empirical evidence from moral psychology, the question is not just how individual moral reasoning works, but mainly how to *reason with someone else*, and whether people can effectively engage in *reasoning together* beyond communicative its communicative function, and rely on it for the the purposes of examination and epistemic justification of moral beliefs. In light of recent empirical research,[260] the prospects of this are – contrary to the classical conceptions of reasoning and rationality – rather unpromising, and it seems hard to argue that it is possible to fully – or even sufficiently – dissect human moral judgement and evaluate what could be understood as a rational and objective moral truth. As Jonathan Haidt suggests, "moral facts are not eternal and universal

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[255] see van Roojen, *Metaethics,* 294.
[256] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. by Jonathan Bennett. Early Modern Texts, 2008.
[257] van Roojen, 79, 294.
[258] For a further discussion on the question of *motivated moral reasoning*, see Chad E. Forbes and Jordan Grafman, "The role of the human prefrontal cortex in social cognition and moral judgment," *Annual review of neuroscience* 33 (2010): 299-324; Adina Roskies, "Are ethical judgments intrinsically motivational? Lessons from "acquired sociopathy"," *Philosophical Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2003): 51-66; Ditto, Pizarro, and Tannenbaum, "Motivated moral reasoning," 307-338.
[259] Contra Smith, whose realism is based on a subjectivist notion of moral facts, and also contra Parfit and Singer, who advocate an objectivist notion of moral facts. These theories, I argue, fail to resolve what Sidgwick described as 'the profoundest problem of ethics,' namely, the problem of dualism of practical reason – the incongruity between rational egoism and utilitarianism.
[260] Mercier and Sperber, "Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory," 68-9.

in the way that non-anthropocentric facts are,"[261] and if there are moral facts, they differ from the facts in the natural sciences. Morality is about values, I believe, and these values are deeply embedded in our psychological makup, which includes our emotions and irrational tendencies. For this reason, people struggle – and will likely keep struggling – when they disagree and try to reason with each other or seek justified objectively valid justification of their moral beliefs, and it is worth keeping this in mind.

[261] Haidt, "Why I think Sam Harris is wrong about morality," *The Righteous Mind*. See also Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.