1 Moral Skepticism
An Introduction and Overview

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1. Introduction

Introductory chapters of edited collections are hardly ever read, and are often rather brief. Despite the double risk of writing something that might not be perused and in a manner in which it is not often done, I will here not only present the essays that make up this volume but also offer an extensive critical overview of moral skepticism with the hope that it will turn out to be useful particularly to the uninitiated reader. I will first provide a taxonomy of varieties of moral skepticism, then discuss the main arguments advanced in their favor, and finally summarize the ten essays here collected, which deal with one or more of those skeptical stances and arguments. But before getting down to business, let me clarify the purpose of the present volume and say something about the peculiarity of its topic.

The aim has not been to put together a collection of essays that would jointly provide a comprehensive treatment of moral skepticism in the manner of a companion or a handbook. Rather, given the fertility of metaethical discussions of skepticism over the past fifteen years, it seemed timely to edit a volume of new research papers that would reexamine old issues in a fresh light, motivate further exploration of them, and introduce novel views. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first collection entirely devoted to exploring distinct varieties of moral skepticism.

An intriguing aspect of metaethics is that it is one of the few areas of philosophy—the others being philosophy of religion and philosophy of action—in which at present one finds quite a number of real skeptics, of one or another kind. In general, philosophers deem the importance of skepticism to be merely methodological, i.e., they regard skeptical arguments as useful tools for their inquiries. For instance, even though epistemologists think that skeptical arguments cannot be dismissed out of hand, most of them take it as plain that their conclusions are false and hence that there are mistakes somewhere in their premises. Careful analysis aimed at discovering the mistakes is considered philosophically useful and rewarding insofar as it allows us to get rid of the erroneous epistemological views expressed by the mistaken premises, and insofar as it allows us to acquire a deeper

understanding of the nature and scope of knowledge and justified belief in general or in particular areas. What are the reasons for there being quite a number of real skeptics in areas like metaethics, philosophy of religion, or philosophy of action? They are perhaps the fact that their subject matters are highly controversial and the fact that life can go on even if one denies, or suspends judgment about, the objectivity of morality, the existence of God, or the existence of free will.[1] Although purely epistemological matters are highly controversial as well, at least the great majority of epistemologists agree on the possibility of knowledge or justified belief in general, differing on how best to characterize their nature and scope. Also, denying, or suspending judgment about, the possibility of knowledge or justified belief in general would have many more damaging implications for our lives for the simple reason that it would target our beliefs as a whole. Whereas moral skepticism or free will skepticism might render certain kinds of action impossible—such as moral, responsible, or free action—radical epistemological skepticism would render action *tout court* impossible—"or so it is claimed," a Pyrrhonian skeptic would immediately add.

2. The Multiple Faces of Moral Skepticism

It is important to make clear the range of views that are taken as varieties of moral skepticism in the present volume. The essays here collected deal not only with skepticism about moral knowledge or moral justification, but also with skepticism about moral reality. In other words, they deal with both epistemological and ontological forms of moral skepticism. Moral anti-realism (or irrealism, as some prefer to call it) is therefore treated as a variety of moral skepticism. This remark will strike metaethicists as obvious and hence unnecessary, but I make it to respond to an objection sometimes voiced, most particularly by epistemologists. The objectors argue that it is a surprising mistake to consider moral anti-realism a form of moral skepticism inasmuch as it does not target the possibility of moral knowledge or the epistemic justification of moral beliefs.[2] This objection reveals more the background of its proponents than the illegitimacy of the label. Note, first, that it is common among metaethicists to regard moral anti-realism as a kind of moral skepticism. Two examples might suffice. J. L. Mackie defended a position according to which first-order moral judgments are all false because the objective moral values, prescriptions, qualities, or relations they purport to describe do not exist. He called his position "moral skepticism" (Mackie 1977: 16–18, 35, 48–49; cf. 1946: 80–81, 83, 85, 90). And Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, in his comprehensive taxonomy of varieties of moral skepticism, includes what he calls "skepticism about moral reality" (2006: 12). A common practice may of course be mistaken. It is legitimate, however, to deem the various forms of moral anti-realism as skeptical for two interrelated reasons. First, moral anti-realism can be taken to target also moral knowledge or justified moral belief inasmuch as it claims that there

are no moral facts, properties, or relations to be known or about which to hold justified beliefs. Second, moral anti-realism calls into question most people's beliefs about morality by claiming either that all of our first-order moral judgments are false because there are no objective moral facts, properties, or relations; or that they are all neither true nor false because the moral facts, properties, or relations they presuppose do not exist; or that moral judgments are actually expressions of non-cognitive attitudes and not assertions about alleged mind-independent moral facts, properties, or relations. (More on these distinct views in a moment.) Hence, though some might be reluctant to regard moral anti-realism as a form of skepticism, not only is it a fact that it is commonly regarded that way among metaethicists, but there are also good reasons for so doing.

How to define moral anti-realism? The answer of course depends on how one conceives of moral realism. In the metaethical literature, a common distinction is that between minimal (or minimalist) and non-minimal (or non-minimalist) moral realism. According to the former, moral propositions are truth-apt and some of them are true. On this conception of moral realism, moral relativism could be considered a form of moral realism inasmuch as it affirms that certain moral propositions are true relative to a given framework. Moral constructivism, too, could be deemed to be a type of moral realism inasmuch as it maintains that certain moral propositions are true if they are those to which agents would agree, were they to engage in an idealized process of rational deliberation. Moreover, those versions of moral non-cognitivism that endorse a deflationary account of truth could also be regarded as forms of moral realism inasmuch as they accept that some moral sentences are true: to say that the sentence "Stealing is wrong" is true is just to say that stealing is wrong.[3] Non-minimal moral realism maintains, in addition, that some moral propositions are true by virtue of something in the world, namely, the objective or mind-independent moral facts or properties that those judgments track. This second form of moral realism can be either naturalistic or robust: roughly put, whereas naturalistic moral realism contends that moral facts and properties are either identical with or reducible to natural ones, robust moral realism claims that moral facts and properties are non-natural or irreducibly moral and hence causally inert.[4] In line with J. L. Mackie and Richard Joyce, I think that moral thought is inherently committed to the idea that objective moral facts or properties are intrinsically prescriptive—they categorically demand or require that people act in certain ways irrespective of their desires, aims, or interests—and that moral naturalism fails to account for such intrinsic prescriptivity (or inescapable authority or irreducible normativity).[5] If so, then a commitment to the existence of objective moral facts or properties that are intrinsically prescriptive characterizes not only the position of those *philosophers* who are robust moral realists, but also *ordinary* moral thought and discourse. Somewhat less contentiously, it seems that ordinary people are typically non-minimal moral realists of some sort, even though at least

the great majority of them are of course unable to articulate their position the way metaethicists do.[6]

Given these considerations, a possible general formulation of the moral anti-realist's ontological skepticism is the following:

> **Ontological Moral Skepticism**
>
> There are no objective or mind-independent moral facts or properties.

This formulation has the advantage of encompassing all those views that reject the ontological commitment of non-minimal moral realism. The two main views to be mentioned are moral error theory and moral non-cognitivism (also known as "non-descriptivism"). Since I will focus on the former, let us start with the latter, whose standard version could be formulated thus:

> **Moral Non-Cognitivism**
>
> Moral judgments are not truth-apt because they are expressions of non-cognitive attitudes or states (such as emotions or commands), not assertions that convey beliefs about alleged objective moral facts or properties.

This view is a form of ontological moral skepticism because it maintains not only that moral judgments are not descriptions of objective moral facts or properties, but also that these facts or properties do not exist. Insofar as they are not statements of matters of fact, moral judgments are radically different from non-moral ones, which also explains the intimate connection between moral thought and motivation. As we will see, the claim that moral judgments are not assertions that convey beliefs, despite their being usually expressed in the indicative mood, is what distinguishes moral non-cognitivism from moral error theory. It should be noted, however, that there is a form of moral non-cognitivism that is milder inasmuch as it holds that, though moral judgments are primarily expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, they also express beliefs. This view is commonly dubbed a "hybrid" form of moral non-cognitivism.[7]

A possible formulation of the other main type of ontological moral skepticism is this:

> **Moral Error Theory**
>
> First-order moral judgments are truth-apt because they are assertions that attribute moral properties to objects, but they are all false because such properties do not exist or are not instantiated.[8]

This is an *error* theory precisely because it claims that, in making first-order moral judgments, we misdescribe or misrepresent the world inasmuch as it

does not contain the items posited, implied, or presupposed by those judgments. Such a formulation of moral error theory corresponds to the way it is typically understood (see esp. Mackie 1977: 35, 48–49). There are also non-standard versions, one of which can be mentioned here because its departure from the standard one is not significant.[9] It maintains that, given that there is a referential or presupposition failure in moral judgments inasmuch as they refer to, or presuppose the existence of, objective moral facts, properties, or relations that nonetheless do not exist, those judgments are neither true nor false (see esp. Joyce 2001: 6–9). So a slightly better formulation of moral error theory would say, not that first-order moral judgments are all false, but that they are all untrue, which may be understood either in the sense that they are all false or in the sense that they are all neither true nor false.

It is worth noting that Mark Eli Kalderon (2005: 105–106, 144–145) claims that the standard formulation of moral error theory should be revised so as to also include moral agnosticism: "Competent speakers should not believe [moral] propositions expressed by the target [moral] sentences that they accept either because they are false or because they are unjustified" (2005: 106).[10] The problem with this revised formulation is that it creates confusion inasmuch as a moral agnostic who remarks that the available evidence justifies neither moral realism nor moral anti-realism refrains, for that very reason, from affirming that there is a fundamental *error* in moral discourse in that this discourse is committed to an *erroneous* picture of the world. Saying that moral beliefs are unjustified is clearly different from saying that they are erroneous.

An error theory is a theory about a given discourse, not a cluster of items, and defining moral error theory as the denial of the existence of objective moral facts, properties, or relations does not allow one to distinguish it from other types of moral anti-realism (cf. Joyce & Kirchin 2010: xii). What sets it apart is the view that moral judgments are assertions that express beliefs. But this should not make us lose sight of the fact that it is the ontological element of moral error theory that leads its proponent to affirm that morality has been undermined or debunked. Note, in this regard, that Mackie explicitly presents his skeptical stance as an ontological thesis and remarks that its linguistic aspect is a corollary of the ontological aspect, which is the central one:

> [W]hat I have called moral scepticism is an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one. It is not, like the other doctrine often called moral subjectivism, a view about the meanings of moral statements. Again, no doubt, if it is to be at all plausible, it will have to give some account of their meanings. . . . But this too will be a development of the theory, not its core.
>
> (1977: 18)

These remarks make perfect sense in light of the fact that Mackie opens the first chapter of *Ethics* with the assertion "There are no objective moral values" (1977: 15).

The other main variety of moral skepticism is epistemological in nature:

> **Epistemological Moral Skepticism**
>
> We do not possess moral knowledge or epistemically justified moral beliefs.

The disjunction in this formulation is due to the fact that epistemological moral skepticism may either target only moral knowledge or be broader in scope and target epistemically justified moral belief. The formulation also attempts to capture two other distinct stances: one extreme that denies the very possibility of moral knowledge or of epistemically justified moral belief, the other more cautious that recommends adopting an agnostic attitude:

> **Nihilistic Epistemological Moral Skepticism**
>
> Moral knowledge is impossible or no moral belief is ever epistemically justified.

> **Pyrrhonian Moral Skepticism**
>
> One must suspend judgment about whether moral knowledge is possible and about whether any moral belief is epistemically justified.

It is nihilistic epistemological moral skepticism that has been more commonly discussed in the contemporary metaethical literature. However, Pyrrhonian skepticism has slowly but increasingly been taken into consideration, perhaps due to the fact that it has, for some time now, been the focus of much attention in epistemology. I will here limit myself to making three sets of remarks about both forms of epistemological moral skepticism, the first two concerning the nihilistic variety.

First, David Enoch (2011: 4–5 with n. 7) claims that robust normative realism (and hence robust moral realism) is compatible with what he calls "epistemological normative skepticism," which claims that no normative belief (and hence no moral belief) is epistemically justified or amounts to knowledge. Though Enoch is right that both views are in principle compatible, I take it that any consistent epistemological moral skepticism must be broad in scope, i.e., that it must target the epistemic credentials not only of first-order moral beliefs but also of the second-order belief that there are objective and irreducibly moral facts. Any epistemological moral skeptic worth his salt will ask how it is that the robust moral realist has come to have cognitive access to the existence of such facts.

Second, Joyce, who has defended both a moral error theory (Joyce 2001) and a nihilistic skepticism about moral justification (Joyce 2006), maintains that these two skeptical stances may or may not be held together:

> One might endorse an error theory while maintaining that people are justified in their moral beliefs, or alternatively endorse an error theory

> while adding that all people's moral beliefs lack justification. Similarly, the claim that moral beliefs lack justification may combine with the view that they are all false, but is also consistent with the possibility that moral beliefs are not only true but objectively true . . . . [J]ustification skepticism is compatible with a realist stance.
>
> (2016b: 1–2)

I disagree with Joyce for two reasons. First, a moral error theorist can consistently maintain that *others* may be, in some sense, epistemically justified in their moral beliefs, but not that *he himself* is. Take the distinction between what are sometimes called the "subjective" and "objective" components of justification: the former refers to whether the subject has responsibly formed a given belief (e.g., there is no evidence of its falsity of which he is aware), while the latter refers to whether the belief has been reliably formed (e.g., the belief tracks the truth). The moral error theorist may realize that, although the total body of the available evidence indicates that all first-order moral beliefs are false, ordinary people are subjectively justified in holding first-order moral beliefs because they are not aware of the evidence of their falsity. By contrast, it does not seem possible for the moral error theorist not to be skeptical about moral justification: if he believes that there are no objective moral facts or properties and, hence, that all first-order moral beliefs are false, then he must conclude that no such beliefs are epistemically justified, either objectively or subjectively. He is fully aware of the undefeated reasons against his former first-order moral beliefs and believes to know that these beliefs do not track the truth. Second, whereas it is not possible for a moral error theorist not to be a skeptic about moral justification, it is possible for a skeptic about moral justification not to be a moral error theorist or some other kind of moral anti-realist, since for all he knows there might be moral facts or properties out there in the world. But note that this is different from claiming that skepticism about moral justification is compatible with the adoption of a non-minimal moral realist view. A non-minimal moral realist could, in principle, affirm that there are objective moral facts or properties, but deny that our moral beliefs are ever justified or that they amount to knowledge. But the epistemological moral skeptic would ask how the non-minimal moral realist can know or justifiably believe that there is an objective moral reality: the latter would have to explain how he can have such metaethical knowledge or such justified metaethical belief, but lack first-order moral knowledge or justified first-order moral beliefs. Why do we suffer from a serious cognitive limitation in one case, but not in the other?

Third, it must be remarked that a Pyrrhonian moral skeptic suspends judgment not only about whether anyone knows or justifiably believes that something is morally right or wrong, but also about the epistemic credentials of the various metaethical views. The reason is that both first-order and second-order disagreements have, at least thus far, struck him as unresolvable. The second-order disagreements include not only those amongst the various

realist views, but also those between moral realism and the non-Pyrrhonian moral skeptical stances. For the Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment with regard to the metaethical debate about the existence of objective moral facts or properties and with regard to the metaethical debate about the possibility of moral knowledge or epistemically justified moral belief. This is why he says that we do not have moral knowledge or epistemically justified moral beliefs, but refrains from denying that we will ever do.

How could moral skepticism be defined in a way that encompassed the various stances that have been distinguished in the present section? Perhaps as the view that undermines or debunks morality by attacking its ontological foundation and/or the epistemic credentials of moral belief. I proceed now to present and discuss—unfortunately, but inevitably, in an incomplete manner—the four main arguments for moral skepticism that have been advanced in the literature.

3. Arguments for Moral Skepticism

A good way to start the discussion of the main arguments in favor of moral skepticism may be by quoting a passage in which Mackie summarizes the five points that support his skeptical position:

> The considerations that favour moral scepticism are: first, the relativity or variability of some important starting points of moral thinking and their apparent dependence on actual ways of life; secondly, the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values, in that they would have to be intrinsically action-guiding and motivating; thirdly, the problem of how such values could be consequential or supervenient upon natural features; fourthly, the corresponding epistemological difficulty of accounting for our knowledge of value entities or features and of their links with the features on which they would be consequential; fifthly, the possibility of explaining, in terms of several different patterns of objectification, traces of which remain in moral language and moral concepts, how even if there were no such objective values people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also might persist firmly in that belief.
>
> (1977: 48–49)

The first four considerations refer to two skeptical arguments. The first is a reference to the argument that Mackie calls "the argument from relativity," but that is more accurately viewed as an argument from disagreement. Considerations two to four are parts of the same argument, the argument from queerness, or rather refer to three different versions of the argument. The passage does not mention the other two main arguments advanced in the literature: the argument from the best explanation and the argument from evolution. However, Mackie's arguments from disagreement and queerness can, as we will see, be constructed as versions of the argument

from the best explanation, and at certain points he mentions evolution as a possible account of the origin of morality. Finally, the fifth consideration concerns the thesis of moral objectification or moral projectivism, which I will also briefly discuss after dealing with the above four arguments. The reason is that it has been, or could be, proposed as a (key) supplement to some of those arguments insofar as it would explain why we systematically make the moral error or hold beliefs that are epistemically unjustified.

The order of exposition will be as follows: the argument from the best explanation, the argument from disagreement, the argument from queerness, the argument from evolution, and the objectification thesis. Given the recent explosion of interest in the evolutionary debunking of morality, I will focus primarily on the argument from evolution. Besides the prominent place they occupy in the literature on moral skepticism, the four arguments and the objectification thesis will be mentioned or discussed in several of the essays of the present volume.[11]

Before proceeding, it is important to briefly explain a now widely accepted distinction in epistemology between *rebutting* and *undercutting defeaters*, which goes back to Pollock (1986). A rebutting defeater for a proposition *p* is counterevidence for *p* that is stronger than one's original evidence for *p*. By contrast, an undercutting defeater for *p* is not evidence that *p* is false, but evidence that undermines the connection between *p* and one's original evidence for *p* by showing, for example, that the source of the belief that *p* is unreliable. In one case, one has evidence that *p* is false; in the other, one has evidence that one does not have sufficient reason to believe that *p* is true. Thus, whereas a rebutting defeater is a reason for believing the negation of *p*, an undercutting defeater is a reason for no longer believing *p*. The distinction is crucial because establishing that the available evidence does not actually justify a given claim does not tell us anything about its truth or falsity. With this distinction in place, it should be noted that, while some of the four arguments to be discussed provide a rebutting defeater for our moral beliefs, others provide an undercutting defeater. In fact, as we will see, the arguments provide one or the other kind of defeater depending on the version of the argument that is advanced.

3.1. Argument From the Best Explanation

The argument from the best explanation, discussed particularly by Harman (1977: 7–10, 13, 130–132), claims that there are no moral facts or properties because they do not figure in the best explanation of why we have moral beliefs or make moral judgments. Here is a possible formulation of the argument:

1. Our having moral beliefs is best explained by certain psychological and socio-cultural facts about us, not by there being moral facts.
2. If moral facts are explanatorily redundant, then they do not exist.

Therefore:

3. There are no moral facts.

The second premise can be interpreted as expressing a principle of parsimony according to which one should not unnecessarily multiply entities: if a kind of entity is not necessary for explaining a given phenomenon, one should not affirm or accept its existence; moreover, one should deny that it exists. That explanatory redundancy or dispensability suffices by itself to assert that something does not exist is no doubt questionable. It could be argued that the second premise should instead be couched in epistemological terms: if certain facts are explanatorily redundant or dispensable, then one has no reason for believing in their existence. In this case, the conclusion of the argument would of course be epistemological as well. Interpreted in this way, the argument still raises a serious challenge to moral realists: they would have the burden of providing reasons for believing that there are moral facts or properties. Note that if the ontological version of argument from the best explanation were sound, it would provide a rebutting defeater for our moral beliefs: it would show that our moral beliefs are false because there are no moral facts or properties. If the epistemological version were sound, it would provide an undercutting defeater: it would show that the realist explanation of our having moral beliefs is not as good as we thought it was. Note also that, even if moral facts understood in a deflationary manner were not explanatorily redundant, the argument could still be formulated so as to target specifically non-minimal moral realism. For example, it could be argued that, although relative moral facts figure in the best explanation of our having moral beliefs, objective or mind-independent moral facts do not.

Let me finally observe that, as we will see in the next subsections, some of the other arguments for moral skepticism can be viewed as versions of the argument from the best explanation insofar as they include a premise that refers to the alleged best explanation of a given phenomenon.

3.2. Argument From Disagreement

The argument from disagreement can be used to support both ontological and epistemological forms of moral skepticism, depending on the premises that accompany the one that refers to the existence of deep, persistent, and widespread disagreements about moral matters. Until recently, the versions of the argument most commonly discussed in contemporary metaethics were those purporting to establish an ontological conclusion. One such version, proposed by Mackie (1977: 37) to ground his moral error theory, includes a best-explanation premise: "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 express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values" (1977: 37). The alternative realist explanation would require that we possess a moral faculty that is highly

unreliable inasmuch as our moral errors would not be sporadic and temporary, but recurrent and lasting (1946: 78). If there is no objective moral fact of the matter concerning any issue, then it is no mystery why people disagree deeply, persistently, and widely about what the objective moral fact of the matter is. The argument could be formulated as follows:

1. There exist deep, persistent, and widespread disagreements about moral matters.
2. Such moral disagreements are best explained as resulting from variations in ways of life or cultures or social conventions rather than from variations in perceptions of alleged objective moral facts or properties.
3. If objective moral facts or properties are explanatorily redundant, then they do not exist.

Therefore:

4. There are no objective moral facts or properties.

This argument can thus be deemed to be a combination of the argument from disagreement and the argument from the best explanation, and so it could perhaps be called 'the argument from the best explanation of disagreement'. Note that the role of disagreement is not irrelevant, since it is what raises the challenge to the moral realist: there is a phenomenon that needs to be accounted for. As observed at the beginning of the present section, Mackie called his version of the disagreement-based skeptical argument "the argument from relativity." Even though this argument exploits the existence of deep, persistent, and widespread moral disagreements, the relativity is seen in the fact that the plurality of conflicting moral beliefs is to be explained by these beliefs being relative to certain socio-cultural factors. Note that Mackie's ontological version of the argument, if sound, provides a rebutting defeater for our first-order moral beliefs. If premise 3 were instead couched in epistemological terms—i.e., if objective moral facts or properties are explanatorily redundant, then one has no reason for believing in their existence—then the argument would be epistemological in nature, thereby providing, if sound, an undercutting defeater for our first-order moral beliefs.

Another, probably stronger, epistemological version of the disagreement-based argument for moral skepticism emphasizes the (as yet) impossibility of coming up with a clear-cut and impartial way of resolving moral disputes, and concludes that conflicting moral beliefs are not epistemically justified or do not amount to knowledge either *per se* or up to this point. Here's a possible formulation of the argument, focusing on epistemic justification:

1. There exist deep, persistent, and widespread moral disagreements.
2. There is (as yet) no clear-cut and impartial way of epistemically resolving such disagreements.

Therefore:

3. Conflicting moral beliefs are not epistemically justified *per se* or up to this point.

The (as yet) impossibility of epistemically resolving moral disagreements may be due to different reasons: the epistemic peerhood of the contending parties, the lack of an agreed-upon epistemic criterion, or the inability to meet the epistemic challenge posed by the so-called Agrippa's trilemma. The disjunction in the conclusion is introduced so as to include both nihilistic epistemological skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism. If sound, this argument provides an undercutting defeater for our first-order moral beliefs. Note that the argument can also be formulated so as to target metaethical views by pointing to the (as yet) impossibility of resolving the second-order disagreements between them, thereby concluding that they are not (as yet) epistemically justified. The epistemological skeptic who utilizes the argument in this way may call attention to the long-standing debates among champions of the various moral realist views. Or he may call attention to the equally plausible alternative explanations proposed by moral realists and anti-realists to explain first-order moral conflicts: these conflicts are due either (*i*) to the fact that only one of the rival parties has epistemic access to the moral fact of the matter while the others suffer from some cognitive deficiency or shortcoming, such as inferential error, ignorance of relevant evidence, or prejudice (as the moral realist contends); or (*ii*) to the fact that there is no such fact of the matter epistemic access to which would in principle make it possible to impartially adjudicate the disagreement (as the moral anti-realist maintains). The epistemological skeptic is agnostic about moral ontology.[12]

3.3. Argument From Queerness

Another prominent argument for moral skepticism is that which focuses on the alleged queerness of certain aspects of morality. The main proponent of this argument and the one who expressed it most clearly was Mackie, who first regarded it as not being very strong or very plausible (1946: 78), but later on considered it as being even more important than the argument from disagreement (1977: 38). Here is his presentation of the argument:

> This has two parts, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.
>
> (1977: 38; cf. 1982: 115, 238)

As we saw at the beginning of the present section, Mackie actually identifies three elements that are queer: the intrinsically action-guiding and motivating nature of the alleged objective moral facts, the supervenience of these facts upon natural ones, and the knowledge of both objective moral facts and their links with the natural ones upon which they supervene. The queer elements are in fact four, given that the first refers to two aspects of objective moral facts that are mysterious: they are action-guiding *and* motivating. Richard Garner (1990: 137, 142–144) and Richard Joyce (2001: 30–31) hold that the preferred reading of Mackie's argument is that according to which the real queerness of moral facts does not concern their alleged power to motivate, but their objective bindingness or prescriptivity or inescapability—their intrinsically action-guiding nature—and maintain that it is such a notion that makes it possible to construct a compelling argument for a moral error theory. Similarly, Jonas Olson (2014: chs. 5–6) distinguishes four versions of the argument from queerness that target supervenience, knowledge, motivation, and irreducible normativity, and claims that only the last one stands up to scrutiny. In their use of the argument to challenge moral realism, Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons (1992) prefer to "revive and rejuvenate" the version concerning supervenience.[13]

Like Mackie's version of the argument from disagreement, his queerness argument includes a best-explanation premise:

> [T]he intuition required might be the perception that wrongness is a higher order property belonging to certain natural properties; but what is this belonging of properties to other properties, and how can we discern it? How much simpler and more comprehensible the situation would be if we could replace the moral quality with some sort of subjective response which could be causally related to the detection of the natural features on which the supposed quality is said to be consequential. (1977: 41)

I interpret Mackie as saying not only that the supervenience of moral properties on natural ones is mysterious, both ontologically and epistemologically, but also that our moral judgments are better explained as subjective responses to natural properties—an explanation that implies nothing queer or bizarre—rather than as descriptions of moral properties that allegedly exist in the world. This better explanation may also include the objectification thesis (to be discussed in Subsection 3.5): our moral judgments are the result of affective attitudes that are caused by natural properties and that are projected onto the world. Thus, like the argument from the best explanation and his version of the argument from disagreement, Mackie's argument from queerness seems to include a premise that expresses a principle of parsimony: if a kind of entity is not indispensable for explaining a given phenomenon, one should deny its existence. A possible formulation of the argument is the following:

1. Accepting the objective truth of morality implies accepting the existence of ontologically and epistemologically queer entities, faculties, and relations.

2. Queer moral entities, faculties, or relations are not indispensable for explaining our moral beliefs.
3. If an item is explanatorily redundant, then it does not exist.

Therefore:

4. The queer entities, faculties, and relations posited by morality do not exist.

If sound, this argument provides a rebutting defeater for our first-order moral beliefs, because it shows that they are all false. But if premise 3 were deemed implausible and were therefore reformulated in epistemological terms—i.e., if an item is explanatorily dispensable, then one has no reason for believing in its existence—then the argument would be epistemological in nature and, if sound, would provide an undercutting defeater for our first-order moral beliefs by showing that they are epistemically unjustified.

3.4. Argument From Evolution

Drawing especially on the work of evolutionary biologists, some moral skeptics have argued that the most plausible account of the origin of morality is the one that appeals to evolution: natural selection has forged certain faculties or capacities devoted to moral judgment. In their view, the evolutionary account defeats our first-order moral beliefs because it does not require that morality be *true*, but only that it be evolutionarily advantageous to *believe* that it is true. Evolutionary debunking strategies of this sort have been deployed in a systematic way particularly by Richard Joyce (2001: ch. 6; 2006; 2016c) and Sharon Street (2006; 2008). Joyce first appealed to the argument from evolution in his defense of a moral error theory, but later on used it to ground a skepticism about moral justification. Street employed the argument in her attack not merely on moral realism but on value realism in general. Although in the two articles in question she does not develop or defend it, she repeatedly mentions constructivism as the anti-realist view that sidesteps her evolutionary debunking argument against value realism.

The defense, interpretation, and criticism of various types of evolutionary arguments for moral skepticism have of late attracted a lot of attention, and in fact the study of 'the evolution of morality' constitutes a burgeoning area in metaethics. The thrust of such arguments is that biological evolution is aimed not at moral belief-forming processes that are reliable, but at moral belief-forming processes that are adaptive. In other words, the evolutionary function of those processes is not that of tracking the truth: their general success at matching or accurately representing alleged objective moral facts explains neither their emergence nor their persistence. Humans are therefore disposed to make moral judgments regardless of the evidence to which they are exposed, regardless of whether there are or are not objective moral facts.

Someone might object that, in order to be adaptive, such processes must be reliable, i.e., the moral judgments they form are evolutionarily useful—i.e., tend to promote survival and reproduction—because they are in general true. However, given that moral beliefs may well be adaptively useful even if they are not true, if what we know is only that evolution is aimed at moral belief-forming processes that are adaptive, then we do have here a defeater: even if some moral judgments are true, there is no reason for claiming that they are. This is the way in which evolutionary skeptical arguments are in general understood in the literature. Resuming the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters discussed at the outset of the present section, the evolutionary account of the origin of our moral beliefs then provides an undercutting defeater for those beliefs: it does not show that they are false—for there might well be moral facts out there in the world—but rather that they were not formed in a reliable way because their source is not trustworthy, and hence that they are not epistemically justified. The resulting moral skepticism is therefore epistemological. However, as we will see, the evolutionary account has also been understood as providing a rebutting defeater for our moral beliefs: a reason for thinking that objective moral facts do not exist, and hence that such beliefs are false. The resulting moral skepticism is therefore ontological.

When appealed to in relation to a moral error theory, evolutionary debunking considerations are normally used as a supplement to arguments that purport to establish the error-theoretic conclusion in order to account, once the conclusion is accepted, for the systematic error we commit in making moral judgments. This seems to be the case of Mackie, who briefly appealed to evolution as an alternative explanation of the origin of our moral sentiments and dispositions (1977: 113–114, 124, 192, 229, 239). Although Mackie (1985: 154) claimed that morality can be seen as an outgrowth from genetically determined retributive tendencies that were favored by evolutionary selection,[14] he did not offer an elaborate evolutionary account of morality in the way Joyce (2001: ch. 6; 2006) has. The latter maintains that the origin of morality is to be found in the development of human cooperation: an individual is more reproductively fit if his sympathetic desires to help his family members are supplemented by a sense of inescapable requirement to favor them that strengthens his motivation to perform helpful actions. This was accomplished by providing people with the belief that such actions have objective moral qualities. Once a cognitive capacity to believe that it is inescapably required to help family members was in place, it was exploited by natural selection to regulate also helpful behavior towards non-kin individuals. It must be remarked that Joyce's view is not that every particular moral prescription can be evolutionarily explained, or that culture or the environment plays no role in determining moral beliefs. Rather, his view is that the tendency to use general moral categories and the belief that certain types of action bear objective moral properties are innate; that cultural influences can cause some of those actions to

stop being regarded as moral or immoral, or cause other types of action to start being so regarded; and that moral dispositions require environmental cues to become manifest. For reasons that will become clear at the end of this subsection, it is important to note that Joyce is at some points cautious regarding the status of his evolutionary account of morality. He presents the hypothesis that natural selection has led us to commit the fundamental moral error as a "plausible speculation" (2001: 135). Also, although he regards the evolutionary hypothesis as plausible, coherent, and testable, and as the best story of the origin of morality we have (2006: 134, 137, 139–140), and although he therefore answers the question "Is human morality innate?" in the affirmative, he remarks that "this is provisional and to a degree speculative, since the present evidence does not warrant answering the question in either a positive or a negative way with any confidence" (2006: 2). Finally, he observes that his evolutionary debunking argument "is conditional: It relies on an empirical premise concerning the evolution of morality which is yet to be established" (2016b: 9).

In his first treatment of the evolutionary account of morality, Joyce not only remarks that it complements the arguments for moral error theory, but he makes the stronger claim that "the fact that moral thinking is a naturally evolved trait has error theoretical implications" (2001: 137) or "provides evidence in favor of the error theory" (2001: 148). In his view, the

> innateness of moral judgments undermines these judgments being true for the simple reason that if we have evolved to make these judgments irrespective of their being true, then one could not hold that the judgments are *justified*. And if they are unjustified, then although they *could* be true, their truth is in doubt.
>
> (2001: 159)

But the fact that if we accept the evolutionary account, our moral beliefs are utterly unjustified, or we have no reason for thinking that they are true, or it is highly improbable or extremely unlikely that they are true, in no way establishes the ontological conclusion of moral error theory. Of course, the evolutionary account places the burden of proof on the non-minimal moral realist to provide us not only with a reason for believing that our moral beliefs are epistemically justified, but also with a reason for believing that there are objective moral facts or properties in the first place. Oddly enough, Joyce himself recognizes that the evolutionary account alone does not support an ontological conclusion, but rather an attitude of withholding of assent concerning the truth or falsity of moral judgments (2001: 160–168). In any case, in later works he explicitly remarks that one cannot argue for a moral error theory on the basis of evolutionary considerations, the correct skeptical conclusion being instead that all moral judgments are unjustified (Joyce 2006: ch. 6; 2016c; cf. 2016b: 8). Joyce's later evolutionary debunking stance seems to vacillate between nihilistic and Pyrrhonian

epistemological skepticism: sometimes he seems to believe that moral beliefs are intrinsically unjustified or that they have been shown to be so for good, and sometimes to believe that they can be deemed to be unjustified on the basis of the evidence available up to this point. Joyce's epistemological version of the argument from evolution could be formulated as follows:

1. Our capacity to form first-order moral beliefs is an evolutionary adaptation produced by natural selection.
2. Biological evolution is not aimed at moral belief-forming processes that are reliable, i.e., processes whose function is to track the alleged moral truths.
3. Given 2, our having beliefs that objects possess moral properties is consistent with nothing ever possessing a moral property.

Therefore:

4. Our first-order moral beliefs are epistemically unjustified.

Street (2006) contends that evolutionary considerations pose a dilemma for realist theories of value (and hence for realist theories of moral value). The fact that the forces of natural selection have greatly shaped the content of our evaluative judgments raises the challenge to explain the relation between such evolutionary influences and the independent evaluative facts posited by the realist.[15] The first horn of the dilemma is the claim that there is no such relation, which results in an implausible skepticism: we would have to conclude that our evaluative judgments are contaminated by a distorting influence and hence that many or most of them are off the track. Although it is possible that "as a matter of sheer chance" our evaluative judgments accord with the allegedly independent evaluative facts, "this would require a fluke of luck that's not only extremely unlikely . . . but also astoundingly convenient to the realist" (2006: 122). In response, one could appeal to rational reflection as another major influence on the content of our evaluative judgments that corrects the distorting influence of evolutionary pressures on such judgments. Although Street does not discard such an influence, she claims that, since rational reflection must proceed by using evaluative judgments, one would be assessing evolutionarily distorted evaluative judgments by means of other evolutionarily distorted evaluative judgments (2006: 124).

The other horn of the dilemma is the claim that natural selection favored those ancestors who were able to grasp the independent evaluative truths, because tracking them was advantageous for survival and reproduction. But this account that presents itself as a scientific explanation is, in Street's view, inferior on scientific grounds to the one according to which the tendency to make certain kinds of evaluative judgments rather than others contributed to our ancestors' survival and reproduction because those judgments

forged adaptive links between the circumstances in which our ancestors found themselves and their responses to such circumstances. This account is superior in terms of the usual criteria of scientific adequacy, for it is clearer, more parsimonious, and does a better job at illuminating the tendency in question (2006: 129–134). Once again, we see that a crucial premise in an argument against value realism is a best-explanation premise. With a focus on moral realism, Street's argument could perhaps be formulated thus:

1. The forces of natural selection have had an indirect tremendous influence on the content of our moral judgments.
2. The moral realist owes us an explanation of the relation between such an evolutionary influence and the independent moral facts he posits.
3. He can claim either that (3a) there is no relation or that (3b) there is such a relation.
4. If he claims that (3a), then he is forced either (4a) to embrace a far-fetched moral skepticism or (4b) to claim that an incredible coincidence took place.[16]
5. If he claims that (3b), then he must propose a tracking account, which is scientifically unacceptable (since the adaptive link account provides the *best explanation* of why our tendency to make certain kinds of moral judgments rather than others contributed to our ancestors' reproductive success).

Therefore:

6. Moral realism is false, i.e., there are no independent moral facts.

It is surprising that Street argues for an ontological conclusion regarding independent or objective moral facts on the basis of an evolutionary debunking argument. For it seems that evolutionary debunking arguments (and genealogical debunking arguments in general) can at most undermine the epistemic credentials of our substantive moral beliefs—i.e., can at most provide us with undercutting defeaters for those beliefs. Street's own evolutionary debunking argument establishes at most that we have no reason for affirming that our moral beliefs match alleged objective moral facts because the best explanation of our tendency to make certain moral judgments makes no appeal to them. Even though the moral realist then owes us a reason for affirming that such facts exist, the argument does not prove that they do not. Note that such epistemological moral skepticism is different from (4a), the skeptical conclusion that Street regards as implausible or far-fetched.

It is important to observe that Street, just like Joyce, expresses caution regarding the status of her evolutionary debunking argument. She claims:

> I attach a . . . caveat to my argument in this paper: if the evolutionary facts are roughly as I speculate, here is what might be said

> philosophically. I try to rest my arguments on the least controversial, most well-founded evolutionary speculations possible. But they are speculations nonetheless.
>
> (2006: 112)

And then she adds:

> [I]t must suffice to emphasize the hypothetical nature of my arguments, and to say that while I am skeptical of the details of the evolutionary picture I offer, I think its outlines are certain enough to make it well worth exploring the philosophical implications.
>
> (2006: 113)[17]

There have been several recent attempts to refute evolutionary debunking arguments, of which I would like to mention two. First, David Enoch (2011: ch. 7) claims that Street's Darwinian dilemma is a particular instance of what he calls "the epistemological challenge." Such a challenge consists in the demand of an explanation of the correlation between normative truths and our normative judgments or beliefs:

> What explains this correlation? On a robustly realist view of normativity, it can't be that our normative judgments are causally or constitutively responsible for the normative truths, because the normative truths are supposed to be independent of our normative judgments. And given that (at least basic) normative truths are causally inert, they are not causally responsible for our normative beliefs.
>
> (2011: 159)

According to Enoch's robust normative realism, then, normative truths are not causally efficacious, and so the demand for an explanation is more pressing for it than for other forms of normative realism. Enoch offers "a third-factor explanation, or indeed a (Godless) pre-established-harmony type of explanation" (2011: 168). Assuming that survival or reproductive success is, not always or intrinsically, but somewhat or by and large good in the sense that it is an aim recommended by normative truths, then given that selective forces have shaped our normative beliefs so as to achieve survival or reproductive success, "our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with the normative truths" (2011: 168). More precisely:

> Selective forces have causally shaped our normative beliefs; that survival is good is (non-causally but closely) related to many normative truths; and so that survival . . . is good explains the correlation between our normative beliefs and the normative truths.
>
> (2011: 169–170)

It must be noted that Enoch remarks that he has "no idea whether this explanation actually works (or whether the phenomenon it is supposed to explain is actually a real phenomenon)," and that all that is crucial for him "is that it *could* work, and that its *structure* is exactly similar to that of the explanation" (2011: 169). At several junctures, he also explicitly recognizes the speculative nature of his explanation (2011: 13, 166, 168, 170 n. 41, 173 n. 50, 175, 269).

Note that no normative skeptic worth his salt would generously concede it to be an objective normative truth that survival or reproductive success is good. The same applies to Enoch's claim that his explanation would still succeed even if the aim selected for were of no value, provided that some of the things conducive to that aim (such as well-being and feelings of interpersonal trust) are good. Again, no normative skeptic would gratuitously grant that such things are objectively and normatively good. The normative skeptic would argue that the claim "*x* is good" is a normative claim, that as such it is called into question by his evolutionary argument, and that it is therefore something that cannot simply be taken for granted in his rival's counter-argument if this counter-argument it is to be dialectically effective. A moral skeptic would deploy the same line of argument if a third-factor strategy were implemented to defend robust moral realism against evolutionary debunking arguments.

William FitzPatrick (2014) proposes a response to the evolutionary challenge that could be called 'the double-influence argument'. According to this argument, even though the evolutionary moral skeptic presents his explanatory claims about the etiology of our moral beliefs as if they were scientific results, they are not supported by actual science unless it is supplemented with philosophical claims that are question-begging against moral realism. Science only shows that evolution has shaped some of our current moral beliefs to some extent, which leaves open the possibility that other moral beliefs have instead been shaped by systematic reflection that has allowed us to apprehend moral facts, and even that some of the moral beliefs molded by evolution have also been molded by systematic reflection. I think that FitzPatrick is right in this respect, since although moral skeptics like Joyce and Street recognize the hypothetical nature of their arguments, they do not seem to be intellectually humble enough, given the confidence with which they espouse the skeptical conclusions of those arguments. But I think that FitzPatrick himself is guilty of the same intellectual sin, since although his argument may be successful against Joyce's or Street's moral skepticism, it seems to point to Pyrrhonian moral skepticism rather than to non-minimal moral realism. For, as FitzPatrick recognizes, we do not know the extent to which evolution has shaped our current moral beliefs; and we do not know either whether some of our moral beliefs have been shaped only by other factors or whether the beliefs that were molded by evolution have also been molded by other factors such as philosophical, political, or religious reflection. Given our lack of knowledge about the actual extent of the influence

of biological evolution, various kinds of systematic reflection, and experience on our current moral beliefs, it seems that we should suspend judgment about the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. FitzPatrick himself (2014: 247) says that he is not denying the possibility that the debunkers' explanatory claims are correct, in which case it seems, once again, that he should adopt Pyrrhonian moral skepticism. And to FitzPatrick's claim that systematic moral inquiry has given us access to objective facts, one could respond by appealing to the epistemic challenge posed by the version of the argument from disagreement that emphasizes the widespread and entrenched disputes both between first-order moral judgements and between metaethical positions (such as his and Joyce's or Street's), and the difficulty of finding a clear-cut and impartial way of adjudicating such disputes.

I am inclined to think that a moral skepticism of a Pyrrhonian stripe might well represent a more challenging rival to moral realism than other moral skeptical stances, but also a serious rival to these skeptical stances. For the Pyrrhonian moral skeptic recognizes the strength of realist views such as those defended by Enoch and FitzPatrick, but claims that their strength does not appear to be greater than that of skeptical views such as Joyce's or Street's. Besides the strong objections leveled against each of the views in question, those authors explicitly recognize the speculative nature of some of the views they defend and the hypothetical character of the arguments they advance, or acknowledge the possibility that their rivals' views might be correct after all. A Pyrrhonian moral skeptic would wonder how, despite admitting those points, the authors in question can be so confident about the correctness of their views.[18]

3.5. Moral Projectivism

The moral skeptic usually recognizes that an important part of his argumentative strategy consists in explaining why human beings naturally believe that there is a moral fact of the matter, and why the great majority of them continue to believe so even after being exposed to what he regards as sound (or at least highly compelling) skeptical arguments. A moral error theorist would put it in these terms: what has led humans, and will continue to lead most of them, to systematically commit the moral error? The argument from evolution discussed in the previous subsection provides one such explanation and even predicts that most people will be dissatisfied with the explanation, given that natural selection has designed the human brain to engage in moral judgment. Another explanation, proposed mainly by Mackie, appeals to the thesis of moral projectivism or objectification.[19] According to this thesis, we project certain sentiments or emotions onto the things, actions, or characters that cause them and are their objects, with the result that we ascribe to those things, actions, or characters certain objective moral features that are intrinsically action-guiding—features that are nonetheless "fictitious." Mackie does not of course mean that we literally project

those sentiments or emotions onto the world, but rather that they cause us to make the above erroneous ascription by making us experience the world as having moral qualities. At one point, he characterizes objectification as "the false belief in the fictitious features" (1980: 72), which can be understood in the sense that the very process of projection consists in coming to erroneously believe in the existence of objective moral features. In talking about "fictitious" moral features, Mackie seems to be already endorsing his ontological moral skepticism. But this makes perfect sense given that moral objectification seems to be proposed as a supplement to his arguments for moral error theory. He complements his error-theoretic position with the objectification thesis in order to offer an explanation of the origin of our pro-morality intuitions that does not imply or presuppose their truth (Joyce 2016e: 187).

An interesting question concerning objectification is that of its relation to an evolutionary account of morality. For instance, a moral error theorist could argue that, while the evolutionary account claims that moral belief was selected for because of its adaptive function or social usefulness, the objectification thesis explains the mental process that gave rise to moral belief. In this case, the process of projection would also be selected for because of its bringing about an evolutionarily advantageous belief in objective moral requirements. Mackie himself remarks that objectification "serves a social function" (1980: 72), and Joyce maintains that it is a plausible hypothesis that natural selection has designed us to project our emotions onto our experience of the world and that the emergence of a projectivist faculty in our ancestors plays a major part in the explanation of the human capacity to make moral judgments (2006: 123–133; cf. 2016b: 10–11).

4. Preview of the Essays

The ten essays in this volume deal with various interrelated issues: error theory, justification skepticism, constructivism, projectivism, veneer theory, inferentialism, disagreement, expressivism, non-naturalism, the Benacerraf challenge, evolutionary debunking arguments, and fictionalism. While some of the essays are sympathetic to moral skepticism, others adopt a critical stance, and still others remain neutral.

Both moral error theorists and moral constructivists maintain that morality is invented or made, not discovered. They differ in that moral error theorists also claim that moral thought is constitutively embroiled in some form of illusion, falsehood, or incoherence inasmuch as it purports to reflect an objective moral reality. In "Projection, Indeterminacy and Moral Skepticism," Hallvard Lillehammer examines the ability of moral constructivism to accommodate two ways in which moral thought has been said by moral error theorists to make erroneous commitments. The first is by believing that, in making moral judgments, one is describing objective moral facts when actually one is merely projecting one's own attitudes onto the

world. The second is by assuming the existence of uniquely correct answers to moral questions that in fact admit of no determinate moral answers. Lillehammer argues that moral constructivism can account for the errors of projection and determinacy that can be attributed to moral thought, because they are only contingent and local phenomena that cannot thereby be taken as universal or necessary traits of moral thought *per se*, contrary to what moral error theorists claim.

Moral error theory can be regarded as a form of *external* skepticism inasmuch as it is a view *about* the moral domain, not a view adopted *within* this domain. It is a metaethical view that seeks to undermine first-order morality and normative ethics 'from the outside' by denying the existence of objective moral truths, facts, or properties that are categorically authoritative. The possibility of external skepticism about morality has recently been contested on the basis of a relaxed conception of truth, fact, and property: claims about the existence of moral truths, facts, or properties are not to be construed as robustly metaphysical, but as moral commitments that are to be assessed according to domain-internal, moral standards. If this were so, then the moral error theorist's denial of such claims would be moral as well, which would render his position incoherent. In "Error Theory, Relaxation and Inferentialism," Christine Tiefensee examines whether a coherent, non-moral form of external skepticism can be constructed, even accepting a relaxed conception of truth, fact, and property. She argues that this is possible provided one adopts an inferentialist construal of moral error theories according to which these theories should refrain from any reference to the alleged falsity of moral judgments and the alleged non-existence of moral truths, and focus instead on claims about the inferential role of moral vocabulary. Tiefensee also assesses the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this new understanding of moral error theories.

Error theory is typically formulated in connection with moral judgments. But there is a more radical version of it that targets normative judgments as a whole, claiming that all such judgments are false. In previous publications, Bart Streumer has argued that we cannot believe such a normative error theory, since it entails that there are no reasons for belief (a reason for a belief being a normative property), and we cannot have a belief and at the same time believe that there is no reason for this belief. But, surprisingly enough, he has also argued that our inability to believe error theory undermines several objections that have been leveled against it and all revisionary alternatives to it, thus making it more likely to be true. In "Why We Really Cannot Believe the Error Theory," Streumer offers a more elaborate version of the argument for the view that we cannot believe error theory and addresses several objections that have been raised to this argument. By doing so, he provides moral error theorists with a new defense against the objection that their theory generalizes to all normative judgments and should therefore be rejected, for the fact that we cannot believe the normative error theory makes this theory more likely to be true.

In Section 2, it was pointed out that there is a weak form of moral realism, commonly dubbed "minimal" or "minimalist," that maintains that moral propositions are truth-apt and some of them are true. In "Are There Substantive Moral Conceptual Truths?" David Copp deals with minimal non-naturalistic moral realism, which he calls "avant-garde non-naturalism." More specifically, he focuses on the type of avant-garde non-naturalism he labels "conceptual non-naturalism," according to which moral non-naturalism does not require that there be non-natural moral properties but only irreducible non-natural moral concepts and substantive conceptual truths involving such concepts. Copp is skeptical about the prospects for such a view, for two reasons. First, the conceptual non-naturalist's theory of concepts faces epistemological and ontological challenges similar to those faced by orthodox moral non-naturalism. Second, so-called moral fixed point propositions are substantive moral propositions but not moral conceptual truths, both because it is implausible that moral error theory is conceptually false and because, as soon as those propositions are qualified to avoid bizarre counter-examples, it becomes clear that they are not conceptual truths.

As noted in Section 2, the notion of objective prescriptivity or bindingness is to all appearances an essential aspect of morality. At the very least, robust moral realists maintain that there exist mind-independent moral facts, properties, or relations that are the source of categorical reasons or inescapable requirements, and one of the reasons moral error theorists target morality is precisely that they take it to posit such queer or mysterious entities. In "The Phenomenology of Moral Authority," Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons agree that categorical authority is an intrinsic phenomenological feature of moral experience and argue that their "cognitivist expressivism" can accommodate such a feature. The key to their argument is the denial that ordinary moral experience is committed to there being objective moral properties and relations that are categorically authoritative, contrary to what both non-naturalistic moral realists and moral error theorists contend. For the claim that there is such a commitment is not revealed as true by direct introspection; nor is it the only possible explanation of those aspects of the phenomenology of categorical moral authority that are reliably revealed by direct introspection. This way, moral phenomenology can exhibit the feature of inescapable authority without there being an ontological error. Still, Horgan and Timmons describe their view as "moderate moral-authority skepticism" inasmuch as it maintains that no moral properties or relations that are categorically authoritative are ever instantiated.

As remarked in Subsection 3.2, the phenomenon of moral disagreement plays a crucial role in certain arguments for either ontological or epistemological moral skepticism. In "Arguments From Moral Disagreement to Moral Skepticism," Richard Joyce critically examines the complex structure of three disagreement-based skeptical arguments with the aim of identifying their difficulties and interrelations. He explores in turn the error-theoretic

version of the argument from moral disagreement that purports to show that there are no (objective) moral facts; the genealogical debunking version that seeks to defeat the justification of moral beliefs; and the version that appeals to the existence of moral disagreement between epistemic peers to undermine the epistemic credentials of their moral judgments. One result of Joyce's analysis is that a common feature of the first two versions of the argument from moral disagreement is that, to succeed in establishing their conclusions, they need to be supplemented with considerations against the plausibility of moral naturalism.

In "Evolutionary Debunking, Realism and Anthropocentric Metasemantics," Mark van Roojen engages with the version of the evolutionary debunking argument according to which it would be a highly unlikely coincidence that our evolutionarily shaped moral beliefs matched the objective moral truths posited by the moral realist. He proposes a new strategy that would make moral realism particularly of a naturalistic stripe immune to that argument. The strategy, modeled on David Hilbert's theory of colors and deploying an externalist metasemantics, consists in distinguishing between the nature of the objective moral properties and our ability to talk about them. Whereas the fact that we are sensitive to moral properties does not make them dependent on us, our epistemic access to them, and hence our ability to talk about them, do depend on our nature. If we had evolved differently, we would not have had epistemic access to, and hence been talking about, the moral properties to which we presently have epistemic access and about which we actually talk. But we would still have had epistemic access to, and been talking about, a different set of properties. Whereas it is a matter of luck that we evolved to grasp, and talk about, the moral properties that we grasp and talk about, it is not a matter of luck that we get things right about them.

The Benacerraf challenge is a well-known objection to Platonism in mathematics. Its proponent argues that, if mathematical entities are, as Platonists claim, mind-independent, causally inert, and existent beyond space and time, then we are led to a skeptical stance according to which it is not possible to explain how it is that we have cognitive access to the mathematical realm or how it is that our mathematical beliefs are reliable. It has been argued that a similar objection could be leveled against those forms of moral realism that fall under what, in Section 2, was called 'robust moral realism'. In "Moral Skepticism and the Benacerraf Challenge," Folke Tersman considers whether, unlike the argument from the best explanation, the argument from disagreement, and the argument from evolution, the moral version of the Benacerraf challenge can undermine moral knowledge without appealing to empirical claims that moral realists deem controversial. His verdict is negative: to successfully counter certain responses to the moral version of the challenge, its proponent needs to have recourse to empirical considerations taken from some of the above arguments.

'Veneer theory' is a term coined by primatologist Frans de Waal to refer to views on which morality is a cultural construction masking people's amoral

biological nature, a nature that is characterized by self-interested (if not selfish) motivation. Veneer theory is a form of moral skepticism inasmuch as it posits rampant hypocrisy while denying the naturalness and prevalence of altruism and non-derivative concerns for justice and fairness. More precisely, it insists with non-cognitivism that moral language is ultimately grounded in command, and joins error theory in maintaining that we are massively ignorant of this fact and mistaken about the ends we are pursuing when issuing or obeying the commands in question. In "Veneer Theory," the most historically oriented of the essays in this volume, Aaron Zimmerman provides a more rigorous definition of veneer theory and questions de Waal's claim that Thomas Henry Huxley was responsible for its adoption by biologists for generations to come. According to Huxley, the in-group solidarity that results from evolutionary group selection is inexorably bound to out-group hostility. Huxley acknowledged the reality of sympathy, justice, and the other moral capacities de Waal finds among chimpanzees, but Huxley insisted that these moral sentiments are necessarily limited in scope. The 'universal' moral principles trumpeted by eighteenth-century revolutionaries in America and France functioned as a moral veneer, covering the involvement of these same revolutionaries in slavery and imperialism.

It has been claimed that a key difference between ancient and contemporary skepticism is that, unlike the ancient skeptics, contemporary skeptics consider ordinary beliefs to be insulated from skeptical doubt. In the case of metaethics, this issue is related to the following question: what attitude towards ordinary moral thought and discourse should one adopt if one is a moral skeptic? Whereas moral abolitionists claim that one should do away with ordinary moral thought and discourse altogether, moral fictionalists maintain that, given that morality produces practical benefits, one should continue to make moral utterances and have moral thoughts, while at the same time refraining from asserting such utterances and believing such thoughts. Focusing particularly on Mackie's skeptical stance, in "Moral Skepticism, Fictionalism, and Insulation," Diego Machuca considers whether the view that first-order moral beliefs are unaffected by moral skepticism is defensible, whether moral fictionalism is compatible with moral insulation, and whether contemporary moral skeptics are in general committed to there being insulation between first- and second-order levels.[20]

Notes

1 Someone might object that free will skepticism is not a form of skepticism *stricto sensu* inasmuch as most of its advocates deny, rather than doubt, the existence of free will and moral responsibility. My response is that, by doing so, free will skeptics undermine or defeat our commonsense belief that people typically choose and act freely, and are therefore morally responsible for what they do. Likewise, I take atheism to be a form of skepticism inasmuch as it undermines or defeats at least certain common religious beliefs. In the next section, I will deal with a similar objection regarding moral anti-realism.

2 For example, Wright (2013: 1157) criticizes along these lines my inclusion of two essays dealing with moral anti-realism in a volume devoted to the connection between disagreement and skepticism (Machuca 2013).
3 This issue is of course related to the problem of creeping minimalism, on which see e.g. Dreier (2004) and Asay (2013).
4 For defenses of moral naturalism, see e.g. Brink (1989), Railton (2003), and Copp (2007). For defenses of robust moral realism, see e.g. FitzPatrick (2008), Enoch (2011), and Wielenberg (2014).
5 See Mackie (1977: 23–24, 31–35, 40, 42, 59, 73; 1982: 115, 238) and Joyce (2001: 31, 37, 43, 62, 67; 2006: 190–209). See also Garner (1990: 138–139, 145).
6 A natural place to look for confirmation or disconfirmation is research in experimental philosophy and moral psychology. But, unsurprisingly, authors are divided. Some have argued that certain experiments support the claim that children are moral objectivists (Nichols & Folds-Bennett 2003; Wainryb *et al.* 2004), and that moral objectivism is plausibly a default setting on commonsense metaethics, but that at some point in their development a number of people move away from that default view (Nichols 2004). Others have claimed that the folk regard moral beliefs as being almost as objective as factual or scientific beliefs, and considerably more objective than beliefs about social conventions or tastes. But they have also observed that endorsement of moral objectivism varies with such factors as the subject's age, the strength of his opinion about the moral issue, the perceived degree of societal disagreement about it, and whether the moral issue concerns a transgression or an exemplary action (Goodwin & Darley 2008; 2010; 2012; Beebe *et al.* 2015; Beebe & Sackris 2016). And still others have argued that the folk do not have an across-the-board commitment to moral objectivism, since they tend to endorse moral relativism when they consider the views of individuals with radically different cultures or ways of life (Sarkissian *et al.* 2011). Regarding most of the above studies (including the two co-authored by him), Beebe (2015) has raised strong objections both to the way their authors constructed their research materials and to the way they interpreted the results obtained, concluding that "it seems much too early to tell whether and to what degree the folk endorse or reject moral objectivism and what form their objectivism or non-objectivism might take" (28). (What all these authors call "moral objectivism" corresponds to what I call "non-minimal moral realism.") Given the disagreement among experimental philosophers and moral psychologists over the extent of the folk's endorsement of moral objectivism, I prefer to cautiously stick to what I have observed both in my everyday interactions and in the course of teaching an ethics class to a variety of non-philosophy undergraduates for a number of years. Note also that most 'armchair' moral philosophers share the view that the folk are moral objectivists.
7 The earliest proponents of non-cognitivism include Ayer (1936), Stevenson (1937), and Hare (1952). For more recent versions of non-cognitivism, see e.g. Blackburn (1984; 1993), Gibbard (1990; 2003), and Horgan & Timmons (2006). Although the hybrid idea is found in the work of some early non-cognitivists, it has been considerably developed and refined in the last two decades: see e.g. Copp (2001), Ridge (2007), and Boisvert (2008). For recent overviews of moral non-cognitivism, see Schroeder (2010) and van Roojen (2013).
8 I talk about first-order (or basic or substantive) moral judgments to refer to judgments that ascribe a moral property to something or that imply or presuppose the instantiation of a moral property. Thus, judgments such as "There are no objective moral values" or "All substantive moral judgments are epistemically unjustified" do not qualify as first-order moral judgments. Neither do sentences that include moral propositions occurring in unasserted contexts, such as "Paul believes that killing an innocent is morally wrong," "'Killing an innocent

is morally wrong' is a grammatically correct sentence," or "If killing an innocent is morally wrong, then the air force should not bomb the town."

9 For other non-standard versions of moral error theory, see Olson (2014: 6–11, and chs. 2 & 3).

10 Joyce, a prominent moral error theorist, at one point took the label 'moral error theory' to designate both views (2006: 223), but later on abandoned this expansion of the label (2016c: 144 n. 3; 2016d: 161–162).

11 Another argument for moral skepticism could perhaps be constructed on the basis of recent empirical research on the role that disgust and other emotions play in moral judgment. The findings of part of such research challenge the rationalist view according to which moral judgment is normally the result of a process of conscious reasoning, and support instead the view that it is generally the result of the influence of quick intuitions, moral emotions, and gut feelings. On the latter view, moral reasoning is most of the time an *ex post facto* process in which one seeks arguments that will epistemically justify an already-made judgment with the aim of influencing the intuitions and actions of others. In making the case that the reasons we offer to epistemically justify our moral judgments are usually mere rationalizations, the studies under consideration can be taken to challenge to some extent the epistemic credentials of our moral beliefs, thus supporting an epistemological form of moral skepticism. On the empirical research in question, see e.g. Haidt (2001), Wheatley & Haidt (2005), Haidt & Björklund (2008), and Schnall *et al.* (2008). See Greene *et al.* (2001) for a more nuanced stance on the role that emotions play in moral judgment.

12 For discussion of different versions of the argument from disagreement, see Brink (1984), Tolhurst (1987), Loeb (1998), Tersman (2006), and McGrath (2008).

13 The authors mentioned in the body of the text are sympathetic to the argument from queerness. For a critical assessment of it, see Brink (1984) and Shepski (2008).

14 More precisely, Mackie (1985: 160–161) maintains that the pre-moral tendencies to care for one's offspring and close relatives, to enjoy the company of fellow members of a small group, to exhibit reciprocal altruism, and to display kindly and hostile retribution are to be ascribed to biological evolution. To cultural evolution are to be ascribed "the more specifically moral virtues which presuppose language and other characteristically human capacities and relations" (1985: 161). See also Mackie (1982: 255).

15 More specifically, Street (2006: 119–120) claims that such an influence is indirect: the forces of natural selection have had a great direct influence on our more basic evaluative tendencies, and these tendencies have in turn had a major influence on the content of our evaluative judgments.

16 Street (2008: 208–209) is clearer that (4a) and (4b) are two distinct possible results of (3a).

17 Evolutionary considerations have also played a key role in an argument for skepticism about the moral significance of disgust. Kelly (2011: esp. ch. 5) has argued that this emotion was recruited or co-opted to perform novel functions associated with morality and social interactions, while retaining most of its core structural features that allow it to effectively perform its two primary functions—namely, the avoidance of toxic or poisonous foods and the avoidance of pathogens and parasites. The disgust system provided (additional) motivation to comply with acquired norms and punish those who violated them, and to avoid members of other tribes. Feelings of disgust are therefore irrelevant to the epistemic justification of moral judgments and norms. This form of skepticism is very restricted inasmuch as it is not concerned with the question of whether or not such judgments and norms are epistemically justified.

18 For recent overviews of evolutionary debunking arguments in ethics, see Vavova (2015) and Wielenberg (2016). For an annotated bibliography, see Machuca (Forthcoming). Tersman (Forthcoming) explores how the evolutionary debunking argument and the argument from disagreement can interact.
19 See Mackie (1946: 81–86, 90; 1977: 42–46; 1980: 71–72, 74, 122, 124, 136–138, 147, 149–150; 1982: 239). See also Joyce (2016e; 2016f).
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