Moral Steadfastness and Metaethics[1]

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1. Introduction

What does epistemic rationality require of us in the face of moral disagreement? In many cases, it's natural to suppose that a rational person would be *steadfast* in her contested moral judgments: she would not lose much confidence on account of disagreement. To make this vivid, consider:

> **Homosexuality** I judge that homosexuality is morally permissible. However, I also believe that an enormous number of people, now and throughout history, disagree with me: they judge that homosexuality is morally impermissible. Moreover, I believe that my disagreement with a great many of these people does not rest on a disagreement over non-moral facts.

It is plausible that, in cases like Homosexuality, I am not epistemically required to significantly reduce confidence in my contested moral belief. To the contrary, I appear permitted – or perhaps even required – to remain steadfast in my moral judgment even in the face of overwhelmingly opposed opinion.

This sort of steadfastness does not seem nearly as respectable when it comes to paradigmatic *non-moral* disagreements, like the following:

> **Mental Math** My friends and I, attempting to calculate an 18% tip on a bill of $45, all separately do some mental math. I conclude that an 18% tip is $8.10. I then learn that many of my friends disagree with me; based on the mental math they have performed, they believe that, in our case, an 18% tip is $8.20.[2]

In this case, it's much less plausible that I am permitted to be steadfast in my belief. Rather, I seem required to *conciliate*: to become less confident in my belief that the 18% tip is $8.10, and perhaps even to abandon it (at least until I can confirm it).

Suppose that these cases are as they seem: steadfastness is indeed epistemically appropriate in Homosexuality, while conciliation is appropriate in Mental Math. What could explain this profound difference? Because the two cases differ in many

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[2] This example is adapted from Christensen (2007, 193). Cf. Christensen (2009, 757).

respects, it's no simple matter to say just which difference would justify responding to them so differently. However, some salient differences between the cases do not seem apt to explain the epistemic contrast between them. Consider two examples. First, many of us are *more confident* in our beliefs about the moral significance of homosexuality than in the results of our mental mathematical calculations. But even if we stipulate that I am extremely confident in the Mental Math case, conciliation seems appropriate. Second, Homosexuality concerns a disagreement that has profound implications about how people ought to act, while Mental Math does not. But we can easily imagine a variant on mental math with profound implications. For example, suppose that rather than attempting to determine a fair tip, we are using the same calculation to determine the code that will deactivate a dirty bomb which will otherwise detonate and kill thousands. If I conclude that the code is 8.10, while many of my friends conclude that the code is 8.20, this seems to call for conciliation.

There is an interesting puzzle, then, about just which feature of Homosexuality makes steadfastness epistemically appropriate. Whatever feature it is, however, seems to be shared by many cases of moral disagreement. Steadfastness seems appropriate, for instance, for a defender of the moral rights of women who notes disagreement from a broadly sexist world community. Perhaps the same goes for disagreements about topics ranging from abortion to the death penalty.[3] It's much less obvious that anything like this general trend holds of non-moral disagreements—even ones that otherwise resemble cases like Homosexuality as much as possible.

These observations suggest the following general claim:

> **Asymmetry**   Epistemic rationality often requires (or permits) a *more steadfast* response to pure moral disagreement than it does to otherwise analogous non-moral disagreement

It is worth emphasizing that Asymmetry is a claim about *pure* moral disagreement.[4] A disagreement over a moral claim, *p*, is a *pure* moral disagreement just in case the parties to the disagreement do not disagree about *p* even partly in virtue of disagreeing about some non-moral claim. Contrast cases where our moral disagreement is wholly based in underlying non-moral disagreement. Suppose for instance, that we disagree about whether we should imprison Scarlet, but *only* because we disagree about some non-moral facts, such as whether she killed Mr. Body with the lead pipe. Other things being equal, to the extent that it is epistemically rational to become less confident that Scarlet wielded the pipe, it is also epistemically rational to become less confident that we should imprison her. (Between these extremes lie mixed cases of disagreements based partly in pure moral disagreements and partly in non-moral disagreements. We set these cases aside here, although a view in the spirit of Asymmetry suggests that we often will

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[3] Kalderon (2005, 34-5) makes a closely related point focusing on disagreements about the morality of abortion.

[4] Note, also, that Asymmetry is a thesis about *moral* judgments. Though a parallel thesis about certain other sorts of normative judgment may be plausible, we doubt that it generalizes to normative judgments generally. Consider judgments about purely social norms: epistemic rationality does not seem to require or permit a remarkable degree of steadfastness in disagreements about politeness.

be required to conciliate somewhat in such cases in light of the underlying non-moral disagreement.)

Our brief discussion thus far is intended to bring out the appeal of Asymmetry. That said, in this paper we neither endorse nor aim to defend Asymmetry. Rather, given its initial plausibility, we grant its truth for the sake of argument, in order to examine its potential metaethical implications. Some philosophers have claimed that anti-realists – but not realists – can offer a natural account of the sort of contrast that Asymmetry posits between the epistemically rational responses to moral and non-moral disagreement.[5] If this were correct, the truth of Asymmetry would be important potential evidence for metaethical anti-realism.

Before motivating these alleged anti-realist implications, we will explain what we mean by "realism" and "anti-realism" in the metaethical context. We understand moral realism as a family of views characterized by three commitments.[6] First, consider ordinary declarative sentences which include moral words, such as "It is wrong to eat meat," and parallel moral thoughts, such as the belief *that it is wrong to eat meat*. The first realist commitment is *descriptivism*: that such sentences and thoughts represent the world as being a certain way. Descriptivism contrasts with views on which moral words mark distinctive speech-acts or semantically express non-belief-like psychological states. Second, some words, like "here" and "illegal," are *context-sensitive*. Interpreting sentences containing these words ordinarily requires filling in certain information from the context of utterance, such as the place of utterance or the intended legal system. The second realist commitment is *invariantism*: the denial that moral words are context-sensitive.[7] The third realist commitment is *representational success*: the realist insists (against certain error theorists) that moral terms have non-empty extensions. For example, the realist will insist that some acts are wrong.[8]

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[5] Compare Kalderon (2005) and McGrath (2011). Kalderon's thesis differs from Asymmetry; on his view, the distinctive feature of pure moral disagreements is that they do not place disputants under a "lax obligation" to perform further inquiry (2005, 35). McGrath's datum concerns moral deference rather than moral disagreement (for a discussion of the contrasts between these issues, see Fritz ms.). However, despite these different characterizations of the datum, both Kalderon and McGrath endorse something akin to the Simple Diagnosis, introduced below.

[6] The term "moral realism" is used in many ways. Our intent here is not to legislate use, but to explicitly state a familiar distinction the term is used to pick out, which is relevant to the project of this paper.

[7] The text simplifies in two ways, for brevity. First, it ignores the contrast between contextualist and *relativist* views here, which concerns, roughly, whether *semantic contents* or only *truth-conditions* vary with context. Second, a more plausible realistic view *grants* that the ordinary words typically used to make moral claims ("good", "wrong", "ought", etc.) are context-sensitive, usable to make claims about non-moral norms, the prevailing moral beliefs in a community, etc. This more plausible realistic view nevertheless insists that there is a wide range of both ordinary and theoretical contexts – the contexts of *moral* thought and talk strictly speaking – in which there is a single invariant content associated with each of these words.

[8] In the following discussion of Asymmetry, we set aside moral error theory because it is not clear that the moral error theorist has any attractive tools for explaining Asymmetry that are not also available to the realist. We set aside another anti-realist view, hermeneutic fictionalism about moral discourse, for a different reason. Fictionalism can be developed in many ways, and the contrast with realism will look different on different versions of the view. (However, the arguments of §§2-3 will be relevant for many versions of hermeneutic fictionalism.)

This brief gloss puts us in a position to show why Asymmetry might appear to favor anti-realism. In non-moral cases like Mental Math, the requirement to conciliate arises in part because the disagreement at hand provides evidence of one's potential unreliability about an objective mathematical fact.[9] But on anti-realist views about moral thought and talk, pure moral disagreements do not concern objective moral facts. Such disagreement thus could not provide evidence of one's potential unreliability about such facts. The anti-realist can thus offer what we call the *Simple Diagnosis* of Asymmetry: given the truth of anti-realism, moral disagreements do not provide evidence of unreliability about objective moral facts, and this distinctive fact about moral disagreements explains why Asymmetry is true. If the Simple Diagnosis withstands scrutiny, and the realist cannot provide as elegant an explanation, antirealism is in this respect more plausible.[10]

This paper argues against the Simple Diagnosis. Sections 2 and 3 illustrate that, when it comes to anti-descriptivism and (anti-realist) contextualism respectively, adopting an anti-realist position does not help the metaethical theorist to offer a plausible explanation of Asymmetry. We show that, while the simplest forms of these views do in fact offer straightforward explanations of Asymmetry, such forms of these views are independently highly implausible. We then show that, when these views are developed in ways that make them more credible, they fail to straightforwardly vindicate Asymmetry. In Section 4, we suggest an alternative, potentially attractive explanation for Asymmetry—one which appeals to the *moral* importance of steadfastness in moral disagreement. We note that this explanation raises important metaethical questions, but does not obviously favor the anti-realist over the realist.

2.   Anti-Descriptivism and Asymmetry

This section considers whether the anti-descriptivist can smoothly explain Asymmetry. We begin by considering the simplest sort of anti-descriptivist theory. We show that, although this sort of theory may offer an easy vindication of Asymmetry, its very simplicity renders it implausible. We then consider ways that anti-descriptivist theories can be made more sophisticated and plausible. These sophistications, we argue, rob anti-descriptivism of its ability to explain Asymmetry in a distinctive way.

To begin, consider a crude form of non-cognitivist anti-descriptivism. On this view, the mental state of judging that it is morally wrong to do A is just the state of having a certain negatively-valenced phenomenal feeling towards doing A.[11] On such a view, it is initially very plausible that I am epistemically permitted to remain

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[9] On a variety of views about the epistemic role of disagreement, disagreement calls for belief revision precisely by providing evidence of unreliability. See, e.g., Christensen (2009, 757) and Kelly (2010, 138-9).

[10] Compare the very similar reasoning in McGrath (2011, 116-7). Kalderon (2005, Ch.1) argues for the stronger thesis that realism is *incompatible* with (something very like) Asymmetry.

[11] For a view that is nearly but not *quite* this crude, see (Ayer 1946). We offer "a certain negatively-valenced phenomenal feeling" here as a placeholder for a plausible specification of the relevant attitude. For discussion of this problem see (Miller 2013, §3.6) and (Björnsson and McPherson 2014).

steadfast in my moral judgment in the face of disagreement. This is simply because there are few if any epistemic constraints on bare phenomenal feelings.[12] This appears to provide the crude non-cognitivist with a simple explanation of Asymmetry.

There are at least two reasons to be dissatisfied by this explanation. First, even if it is compatible with the *letter* of Asymmetry, it fits uneasily with its *spirit*. Most who consider steadfastness an appropriate response to disagreements like Homosexuality will not consider *every* sort of reaction to such disagreements epistemically acceptable. For example, other things being equal, it seems irrational to become *much more* confident in a moral judgment upon learning that it is subject to widespread disagreement. But crude non-cognitivism suggests that this transition – being a mere change in phenomenal feelings – is not apt for epistemic assessment.

This is an instance of a second and broader problem: the crude non-cognitivism just sketched fails to provide a satisfying account of moral judgment quite generally. Anti-descriptivism is intended as a *hermeneutic* thesis about moral thought. And this means that the anti-descriptivist faces pressure to vindicate certain further appearances about moral thought and talk (or at least demonstrate compatibility with them). For example, anti-descriptivism should vindicate the idea that certain sets of moral judgments are *inconsistent*,[13] and that possessing such an inconsistent set of judgments is (perhaps other things equal) epistemically irrational.[14] Consider, for example, the pair of judgments: *Kissing is wrong; kissing is not wrong*. It is not clear whether the crude non-cognitivism sketched above can explain the irrationality of simultaneously accepting such a pair of judgments.

Suppose that the anti-descriptivist is able to refine her view so that it can explain such epistemic constraints on moral judgments. The first thing to note is that she can no longer explain Asymmetry in the way that the crude non-cognitivist did. Instead of appealing to a general lack of epistemic constraints on moral thought, the anti-descriptivist must show that her view generates some such constraints (such as consistency) but not others (conciliation in the face of disagreement). We now suggest strong reasons to doubt that the anti-descriptivist can accomplish this goal.

In order to provide a plausible hermeneutic theory, anti-descriptivism must be able to accommodate the intelligibility of commonplace thoughts of the form: *I am not morally infallible*. Given Asymmetry's focus on pure moral disagreement,

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[12] Many philosophers take certain emotions to have distinctive *fittingness conditions*, and representational, or quasi-representational contents (see DeSousa 2014, §5-6 for discussion). Non-cognitivist views that identify moral judgments with such states will potentially have additional resources to vindicate epistemic constraints on moral judgments. We set this interesting dimension of the problem aside here.

[13] Offering a general account of inconsistency in moral thought is a non-trivial challenge for the non-cognitivist, intimately connected to the Frege-Geach problem (cf. Gibbard 2003; Schroeder 2008).

[14] This caveat is intended to leave open the possibility that in certain real-life cases, retaining all of an inconsistent set of beliefs could be the *most* rational option for an agent. Compare (Harman 1983). Note that part of the task here is to explain how epistemic norms can apply to non-cognitive states at all.

we focus on fallibility concerning purely moral matters. One way to model such fallibility judgments begins with the observation that one could be better informed about certain arguments and ideas, more imaginative when considering unobvious alternatives, and more coherent in one's beliefs. In short, one's moral thinking could be more *procedurally ideal.* Now suppose that Ulf's view about purely moral matters is utilitarian. We might interpret Ulf's thought that this view is *fallible* as involving: (a) a belief that he *might* reject the utilitarian principle upon becoming more procedurally ideal, and (b) a higher-order attitude, endorsing abandoning the utilitarian principle, were he to come to believe that he *would* abandon it if he were more procedurally ideal (cf. Blackburn 1998, 318).

While this model makes some progress, it fails to explain the full range of reasonable fallibility judgments. For many of us think that someone could be procedurally ideal, but nonetheless flat-out *wrong* about a purely moral matter. If I accept this general view, appropriate humility arguably requires me to acknowledge that it applies to me: that *I* might be such that, even were I to become procedurally ideal, I might nonetheless be mistaken about some purely moral matter. The crucial issue here is not whether this thought is *correct*. Rather, the issue is that it is manifestly a thought that a reasonable person might have. The challenge for the anti-descriptivist is to explain what this thought could even amount to. It is controversial whether the anti-descriptivist can offer an adequate explanation here (Egan 2007, Köhler 2015). However, because the thought seems so natural, the ability to explain what it consists in seems very important to the credibility of anti-descriptivism as an interpretation of our actual thought and talk.

Why is this important? Briefly, because once the anti-descriptivist explains this sort of thought, the Simple Diagnosis of Asymmetry suggested above is no longer available to her. If it is possible to be flat-out wrong about a purely moral matter, then it seems that disagreement could provide evidence that I might indeed be mistaken here, just as it can in cases like Mental Math. It is true that a plausible anti-descriptivism must seek to explain the thought that I might be mistaken without invoking moral reality. But conciliation can be motivated by the thought that disagreement is evidence that I might be mistaken, so it is not clear what talk of reality adds to this sort of motivation.

The clear contrast that underpins the Simple Diagnosis of Asymmetry thus collapses once we consider relevantly plausible versions of anti-descriptivism.[15] Although an implausibly simple anti-descriptivism could easily explain why Asymmetry is true, the path from a plausible anti-descriptivism to Asymmetry is far from obvious.

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[15] Similar points hold for Kalderon's Asymmetry-like thesis mentioned in n.6 above. According to Kalderon, in cases like Mental Math but not cases like Homosexuality, one is under a lax procedural obligation to inquire further. But plausible forms of anti-descriptivism appear compatible with the idea that the disagreement in Homosexuality is explained by the fact that one of the parties is imperfectly informed or just flat-out wrong. Appropriate humility suggests that it might be *your* moral views that could be improved. In light of this, it is hard to see how plausible forms of anti-descriptivism can explain Kalderon's datum.

3. Contextualism and Asymmetry

In this section, we consider a strategy by which *contextualist* anti-realists might attempt to vindicate Asymmetry. Roughly, the strategy is to claim that typical disputants in a pure moral disagreement are talking or thinking about *different subject matters*. This strategy, we argue, faces a problem very similar to the one just noted for the anti-descriptivist. Although certain simple contextualist views can easily vindicate Asymmetry in this way, they do so at the cost of being independently implausible. And, as contextualist views become more sophisticated and plausible, they frequently lose the ability to straightforwardly vindicate Asymmetry.[16] We illustrate this point by briefly considering two influential ways of making contextualist views more sophisticated.

Consider a view that sometimes goes by the name "simple subjectivism:" moral judgments are simply beliefs about certain of one's own attitudes, and the content of a moral sentence is a proposition reporting the attitudes of the person who utters it. On this view, when I say "homosexuality is morally permissible," I simply assert that I have a certain positive attitude or cluster of attitudes towards homosexuality. On our usage, this is a form of metaethical *contextualism,* because interpreting the sentence "homosexuality is morally permissible" will require information from the context of utterance: specifically, which person has uttered the sentence.

This view suggests that people in cases of pure moral disagreement are concerned with different subject matters; they are *talking past* (or, in cases of unspoken disagreement, *thinking past*) one another. This seems to justify steadfastness. Epistemic rationality should not require that I revise beliefs about which attitudes *I* currently have in light of evidence that *other people* have different attitudes. Thus, if pure moral disagreement typically involves this sort of thinking-past, while non-moral disagreements typically do not, this would provide a straightforward explanation of Asymmetry.

Notice, however, that the *very feature* that allows the simple contextualist to explain Asymmetry is independently implausible: parties to paradigmatic moral disagreement *do not* appear to be simply talking past one another. They usually seem to be genuinely disagreeing; paradigmatic cases of talking or thinking past, by contrast, do not involve genuine disagreement. In light of this, any plausible version of contextualist anti-realism must amend the simple account just given, in order to explain how pure moral disagreement can be genuine. We consider two of the most initially promising such amendments below. In each case, the proposed amendment both helps contextualists to explain why pure moral disagreements are genuine and makes it harder for them to explain why Asymmetry is true.

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[16] Something very much like the contextualist strategy is also available to relativist views (see MacFarlane 2014). For reasons of space, we limit our discussion to contextualism, but relativist views face the same problem as contextualist ones: they cannot plausibly explain the genuineness of pure moral disagreement while retaining the simple "talking-past" vindication of Asymmetry. For further discussion, see Dreier (2009) and Carter (2014).

James Dreier (1990) offers a contextualist view that makes use of an analogy between moral terms and paradigmatic context-sensitive terms like "here" and "nearby." It would be far too simple, Dreier notes, to suggest that "nearby" always picks out locations close to the speaker; in certain embeddings, "nearby" picks out locations close to some other contextually salient position (1990, 23). Similarly, Dreier argues, we should not think that a sentence like "murder is morally wrong" always simply reports on the speaker's attitudes toward murder. On a more plausible contextualist account of "morally wrong," the term's semantic value is determined in part by *whichever* "moral system" is the best candidate within the context of utterance (1990, 24). And, according to Dreier, the best candidate moral system is not always the one most closely associated with the speaker's attitudes. Therefore, a claim like "murder is wrong" may be relativized to a moral system that the speaker does not endorse—including, in some cases, the moral system most nearly endorsed by her society at large (1990, 22).

Although Dreier's primary goal is not to explain how pure moral disagreement can be genuine, his account suggests one such explanation. Perhaps moral disagreement is genuine precisely when two moral thinkers' judgments are relativized to the same moral system. On Dreier's theory, this condition can be met even when disputants' actual attitudes diverge substantially. If, for instance, the best candidate moral system in a context is very often the moral system most prevalent in the conversational participants' society, a great many moral disagreements will be genuine.[17]

This vindication of genuine pure moral disagreement threatens the contextualist's ability to explain Asymmetry, however. Consider any case in which Dreier's view vindicates the existence of genuine moral disagreement. The view does that by suggesting that – in that context – the parties to the dispute are disputing the *same* (contextually fixed) subject matter. But if this is the case, a disputant in such a context might be epistemically required to take into account the possibility that her opponents are more accurately representing this shared subject matter. But it was precisely the mismatch in subject matter that allowed the simple contextualist to vindicate Asymmetry. In short, while the claim that context frequently determines a common topic for pure moral disagreement can neatly explain the genuineness of that disagreement, it also destroys the simple contextualist's explanation of Asymmetry for all such cases.

Consider a second way that the contextualist might model pure moral disagreement. To begin, notice that utterance of some context-sensitive expressions can simultaneously bear both of two very different relationships to the contextually relevant standard for those expressions. Consider an example. On the one hand, when I utter "Jane is tall," whether this sentence is true is partly a function of the contextually relevant standard for tallness. On the other hand, utterances like this – especially if they are accepted by conversational participants – can function to *determine* which standard of tallness is contextually relevant (Barker 2002). However, other conversational participants can challenge such attempts to amend the contextually relevant standard. For example, you might

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[17] Dreier leaves open this possibility (1990, 22).

resist my attempt to modify the standard for 'tall' by saying "Nope. Jane is definitely *not* tall."

David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013, 3) dub such cases instances of *metalinguistic negotiation*: what is at issue in the dispute between us is whether to admit a sharpening of the extension of "tall" that includes Jane. A metaethical contextualist who accepts this view can thereby argue that an exchange like "Kissing is wrong"/ "No, kissing is not wrong" involves opposing attempts to "pragmatically advocate" (2013, 17) for certain sharpenings of the contextually relevant moral standard. By asserting "Kissing is wrong," a speaker can advocate for use of the term "wrong" in such a way that it applies to the act of kissing. Likewise, by asserting "Kissing is not wrong," another speaker can advocate for use of the term "wrong" in such a way that it does not apply to kissing. Plunkett and Sundell argue that, even if disagreements of this sort do not involve any contrary beliefs about the facts about the act of kissing, there is nevertheless an entirely recognizable sense in which they are *genuine* disagreements. They are disagreements in *conceptual ethics*.[18]

Metalinguistic negotiation, then, provides an attractive tool to the contextualist who wants to explain how pure moral disagreements can be genuine disagreements. But it's far from clear that the contextualist who uses this tool can easily vindicate Asymmetry. To see this, suppose for simplicity's sake that truly *pure* moral disagreements are genuine disagreements only in the sense that they involve disagreements about how to use moral terms or concepts.[19] And suppose that I use the standard WRONG$_A$ in making judgments about moral wrongness. I then learn that almost every moral thinker whom I respect considers WRONG$_A$ seriously flawed and instead uses a different standard, WRONG$_B$. Learning about this disagreement seems to put me under rational pressure to become less confident that I should use WRONG$_A$ and more confident that I should use WRONG$_B$. Next consider any moral sentence that is true when "wrong" gets the content WRONG$_A$ but false when "wrong" gets the content WRONG$_B$. It seems that the disagreement should make me more hesitant to assent to that sentence, and to token it in my moral reasoning. In short, even though I begin such a disagreement by "thinking past" most other moral thinkers, rationality might require me to *stop* thinking past them. But once I do stop thinking past them, their disagreement can provide evidence that I might be unreliable about the (now shared) topic, and hence epistemically required to conciliate.

The reasoning just sketched suggests that, although metalinguistic negotiation can help the contextualist to explain why pure moral disagreements are *genuine*, that very explanation of genuineness at least makes the contextualist's ability to

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[18] On Plunkett and Sundell's usage, conceptual ethics involves questions like "how should we use our words?" as well as questions like "which concepts should we use?" (2013: 3; see also Burgess and Plunkett 2013a and 2013b).

[19] The contextualist need not say that *all* genuine pure moral disagreements are disagreements in conceptual ethics; she could allow that, while many genuine pure moral disagreements have this character, some are genuine for a different reason or in a different way. Perhaps, for instance, some are genuine for the reason that we have noted in our discussion of Dreier: because, in those cases, conversational context establishes a common subject matter for the utterances of both parties.

vindicate Asymmetry less obvious. We cannot argue here that no such vindication is possible. However, rather than falling trivially out of observations about talking past, such a vindication looks like a highly substantive additional explanatory task.

In this section, we again cast doubt on the Simple Diagnosis of Asymmetry. We did so by considering two ways in which sophisticated contextualists might account for the genuineness of pure moral disagreement. We argued that both strategies prevent sophisticated contextualists from offering a simple "talking-past" explanation for Asymmetry. To be clear, not every contextualist adopts one of the two strategies discussed in this section in order to explain the genuineness of pure moral disagreement. (For two other leading contextualist approaches, see Finlay 2014 and Khoo and Knobe 2016; for a survey, see Björnsson 2017, especially 282ff.) In light of this, we cannot conclusively show that the problems that we have noted in this section afflict all contextualist attempts to straightforwardly explain Asymmetry. But there are reasons for the contextualist to be pessimistic on this front. Notably, although we have focused on the importance of accounting for the genuineness of pure moral disagreement in this section, this is not the only important desideratum on a satisfactory contextualist view. A satisfactory contextualism should also meet the desideratum that we noted for anti-descriptivist views in section 2: it should allow for reasonable judgments about purely moral fallibility. And section 2 suggested that natural ways of interpreting this sort of judgment will undercut the Simple Diagnosis of Asymmetry. We conclude, then, that the path from contextualism to Asymmetry is far from straightforward.

4.   Virtue, Rationality, and Asymmetry

We have argued that plausible versions of anti-descriptivist and contextualist anti-realism cannot vindicate Asymmetry in the way envisioned by the Simple Diagnosis: even in the absence of objective moral facts, there can be clear explanations of epistemic pressure toward conciliation on moral matters. It is worth emphasizing the limitations of these arguments: they debunked *simple* anti-realist attempts to vindicate Asymmetry. They are compatible with the more modest hypothesis that – while things are much more complicated than the Simple Diagnosis suggests – the anti-realist will nonetheless turn out to be *better* placed to explain Asymmetry than the realist. In this section we cast doubt on even this modest hypothesis. We make a provisional case for the idea that Asymmetry is best explained by *moral* pressures on our moral beliefs. We do not take a stand on precisely how this moral pressure might be related to epistemic rationality; we simply argue that, if Asymmetry is best explained in this way, there is no reason to think that it favors the anti-realist.[20]

Return to the example that we used to initially motivate Asymmetry: most of us are aware that a distressingly vast sea of humanity takes homosexuality to be

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[20] Several philosophers have offered alternative accounts that can be interpreted as vindicating something like Asymmetry: see, for instance, Elga (2007), Huemer (2011, 29), Sherman (2014), and Vavova (2014). We cannot address these alternatives here, but note that, like our own briefly sketched proposal, they are bad news for the idea that Asymmetry is evidence of metaethical anti-realism.

wrong. Imagine that, in light of this disagreement, you suspend judgment about this question. Imagine further that you let this agnosticism inform your attitudes, your personal relationships, and your political actions. Set aside the sort of question we have been focusing on (would it be *epistemically rational* to suspend judgment in this way?). Instead, ask: would this suspension of judgment be *morally* good or bad? This latter question seems much easier to answer: it would be morally awful.[21] More generally, it *often* seems to be a moral vice to let your moral commitments be pushed around by prevailing beliefs.[22]

One could attempt to deploy this insight to *debunk* the appeal of Asymmetry: roughly, the idea would be that in thinking about cases like Homosexuality, we are somehow mistaking our *moral* judgment that steadfastness is virtuous for an *epistemic* judgment that it is rational.[23] While we cannot rule out this attempted debunking, it is worth emphasizing two reasons why it is unattractive. First, successful debunking arguments need more than a "just so" story about error, such as the one just offered. But it is unclear what independent reasons we have to distrust our clear judgments about cases like Homosexuality. Second, given the ubiquity of such cases, the conclusion that steadfastness in such cases is morally virtuous but epistemically irrational suggests a deep tension between our *moral* and *epistemic* ideals that many will find hard to swallow.

Suppose, then that one rejects this unappealing tension, thereby denying that disagreements in cases like Homosexuality require us to sacrifice either our epistemic rationality or our moral virtue. Given what we have argued, this commits one to there being a connection between the morally appropriate response to a moral disagreement and the epistemically rational response to that disagreement. We suggest that a related commitment arguably underlies central parts of the literature on moral testimony. Opponents of legitimate moral testimony insist that we should regulate our moral opinions *autonomously* (Wolff 1970), or that we are required to hold moral beliefs solely for the (moral) reasons that *make them true* (Hopkins 2007), or that moral believers should aim at *understanding* rather than knowledge or truth (Hills 2009). Each of these theses is more straightforwardly motivated as a view about morally virtuous cultivation of our moral beliefs than as an epistemic norm. Their epistemic significance is most easily motivated by combining their plausibility as moral theses with the implausibility of the deep moral/epistemic tension mentioned above. Some of the most powerful defenses of the epistemic legitimacy of moral testimony can be read in the same way. For

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[21] Some may be tempted to think that only the change in behavior and attitudes, and not the suspense of judgment itself, is morally problematic in this case. Even on this view, however, the case justifies investigation into connections between moral virtue and epistemic rationality. An agent who becomes agnostic about homosexuality without changing her behavior or attitudes purchases moral virtue at the cost of internal incoherence. We should, if possible, avoid the conclusion that disagreements like Homosexuality force us to sacrifice either virtue, epistemic rationality, or coherence.

[22] We think it is most natural to describe the moral complaint here in terms of virtue or vice. We do not intend by doing so to commit ourselves to a view of morality that takes virtue to be the central organizing notion.

[23] See Wedgwood (2007, 255-6) and Adams (1999, ch. 16) for reasons to think that morality may sometimes require greater certainty than rationality allows.

example, Karen Jones frames her defense of moral testimony (1999) in terms of the trust that mature and morally virtuous agents will place in some moral testimony.

In this brief paper, we do not attempt to prove that there is *in fact* a connection between morally virtuous and epistemically rational moral thinking. Nor do we make any proposals about the form such a connection might take or about the best way to explain it. We offer only a conditional conclusion: if the correct explanation of Asymmetry involves an appeal to the moral goodness of steadfastness in cases like Homosexuality, then Asymmetry does not favor anti-realism. After all, the claim that steadfastness is morally good in cases like Homosexuality is a moral claim, and one which appears straightforwardly compatible with a variety of both realist and anti-realist *metaethical* views. Notably, there is no obvious reason that an anti-descriptivist or a contextualist would feel any pressure to accept this claim in light of their metaethical commitments. Combined with our prior arguments, this suggests that there is little left to be said for the view that Asymmetry even *prima facie* favors the anti-realist.

5.   Conclusions

This paper has argued that the plausibility of Asymmetry does not favor the anti-realist. Our foil was the Simple Diagnosis: that Asymmetry can be explained because moral disagreement does not provide evidence of our possible unreliability concerning objective moral facts. In §2-3, we argued that the Simple Diagnosis is too simple: it is compatible only with otherwise implausible anti-realist views. Once such views were modified to explain other crucial phenomena, they failed to provide a clear explanation of Asymmetry. In the last section, we pushed further, arguing that the most promising framework for explaining Asymmetry – which appealed to considerations about how the morally virtuous agent would respond to disagreement – also suggests that there is no reason to think that the best explanation of Asymmetry will ultimately favor the metaethical anti-realist.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer that Asymmetry has no metaethical implications. To see this, suppose both that Asymmetry is true, and that the connection between moral virtue and epistemic rationality that we motivated in §4 is at the heart of the correct explanation of Asymmetry. There is every reason to think that explaining the relevant connection between moral virtue and epistemic rationality will require significant metaethical (and/or metaepistemological) theorizing. This theorizing will have to look beyond the question of whether moral realism or moral anti-realism is true; it will need to address a host of questions about the relationships between different classes of normative judgments and/or facts. If epistemic obligations are in some way shaped or constrained by moral considerations, in virtue of what do moral considerations provide these constraints? Do other flavors of normativity—such as, for instance, *all-things-considered* norms on action—place similar constraints on epistemology? The argument of this paper motivates inquiry into these sorts of fundamental *inter-normative* questions.

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