**Applying Moral Caution in the Face of Disagreement**

ABSTRACT: In this paper I explore an epistemic asymmetry that sometimes occurs regarding the moral status of alternative actions. I argue that this asymmetry is significant and has ramifications for what it is morally permissible to do. I then show how this asymmetry often obtains regarding three moral issues: vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving. In doing so, I rely on the epistemic significance of disagreement and the existence of moral controversy about these issues.

1. *Introduction*

Matheson (2016) explored an epistemic asymmetry that sometimes occurs regarding the moral status of alternative actions. This epistemic asymmetry obtains when someone is justified in either believing or suspending judgment that a given action is a serious moral wrong, while at the same time knowing that an alternative action is morally permissible. It was argued that in such situations we should exercise moral caution, making it wrong to commit the former action. In this paper, I further explain and motivate the principle of moral caution while extending its application. In section 1, I clarify the principle of moral caution, distinguish it from other neighboring principles, and motivate it with a central case. In section 2, I argue that the epistemology of disagreement has the result that the principle of moral caution has more application then may be thought. In section 3, I apply the principle of moral caution to issues of vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving, arguing that the relevant epistemic asymmetry is often met. Finally, in section 4, I turn to defending the principle of moral caution from several objections.

1. *Moral Caution*

It is morally wrong to be flippant about morality. We shouldn’t take morality lightly, and so, we should avoid excessive moral risks when we are able. This thought is captured in the following principle:

**MORAL CAUTION (MC):** Having considered the moral status of doing action A in context C, if (i) subject S (epistemically) should believe or suspend judgment that doing A in C is a serious moral wrong, while (ii) S knows that refraining from doing A in C is not morally wrong, then S (morally) should not do A in C.[[1]](#footnote-1)

MC is a bridge principle that connects something that is *epistemically* true of you to something that is *morally* true of you. While it has long been acknowledged that one’s *social* context can make a difference for what it is morally permissible to do, what MC brings out is that one’s *intellectual* context can have similar ramifications. In particular, MC claims that when alternative actions exhibit a certain epistemic asymmetry for you, it affects what it is morally permissible for you to do. This asymmetry obtains when regarding one action it is epistemically justified for you to either believe or suspend judgment that the action in question is a serious moral wrong, while at the same time, you know of an alternative that it is morally permissible. Put differently, the epistemic asymmetry obtains when one action is morally cloudy (at best), yet an alternative is morally crystal clear. MC is itself silent as to which factors make one epistemically justified in adopting a doxastic attitude toward a proposition (e.g. evidence, reliability of the belief forming process, etc.) as well as what the conditions for knowledge are. As such, MC is compatible with numerous competitor epistemological accounts of knowledge and justification. MC is solely concerned with what follows when these epistemological states obtain, regardless of what brings them about.

MC is best understood against the backdrop of moral realism, according to which there are objective moral truths and, at least in principle, we are able to know them. MC is itself to be understood as an objective moral principle – as a principle that is about what one morally should do, whose truth is independent of anything that anyone thinks about it. Further, MC only has application if there are moral truths and if at least some of them can be known. Meeting condition (ii) of MC requires having some moral knowledge, and moral knowledge requires moral truths.

While MC assumes a kind of moral realism, it is also committed to a benign relativism about ethical matters. Since people can be in different intellectual contexts, different actions may be morally permissible for them. Even if the truth of fundamental moral principles never changes, what we are epistemically reasonable in believing about those principles can (and plausibly does) change. MC has it that certain changes in our epistemic situation come with changes to our moral situation. According to MC, actions that were once impermissible could become permissible (by its antecedent ceasing to be met), and actions that were once permissible could become impermissible (by its antecedent becoming met). However, these changes would occur given *changes in what it is epistemically reasonable to believe* about morality, and not *a change in the fundamental moral truths*.

To better understand MC, it will be helpful to compare it to several similar principles.

**CONSCIENCE FOLLOWING (CF):** You are morally required to follow your conscience.

According to CF, you are morally required to act in the way that your conscience leads you. In some ways, MC is like CF. Both principles connect a subjective feature of the individual (their epistemic situation or their conscience) to an objective moral feature of that individual (what is morally required of them). People differ in terms of how their conscience guides them, and people differ in terms of what they know or are justified in believing. So, the guiding features in both MC and CF are subjective. Nevertheless, both principles claim that a moral demand is placed on the subject in virtue of the respective subjective feature being met; both principles make moral demands of their subjects.

There are also many ways in which MC differs from CF. First, the subjective features relevant to each principle are different. CF is concerned with the deliverances of one’s conscience, while MC is concerned with one’s epistemic states. Second, MC is a *morally restrictive* principle whereas CF is not. According to CF, your conscience is to be your moral guide – your conscience *fully determines* what is morally right and morally wrong for you to do. CF can make you morally required to act in ways you wouldn’t otherwise be required to act, and it can forbid you from acting in ways that you wouldn’t otherwise be forbidden to act. Importantly, CF can make an otherwise impermissible act permissible. In contrast, MC is only morally restrictive in that it *only constrains* the set of permissible actions. MC does not have it that any action that would otherwise be impermissible is made permissible by one’s epistemic situation. If, independent of one’s epistemic situation, an action would be morally wrong, MC does not have it that any epistemic situation could make that action morally permissible. However, actions that would otherwise be permissible *can* be made impermissible by MC. In this way, MC is a morally restrictive principle. Third, MC is also restricted in its application. MC does not issue verdicts about the morality of many actions, since for many actions the antecedent of MC is not met. MC only issues moral verdicts when its antecedent is met, and unlike CF, meeting the antecedent of MC is quite difficult. Often moral risk is inevitable since no alternative action is known to be morally permissible. In all such situations, MC is silent as to what one should do. So, while bearing some similarities to CF, MC is a much weaker principle.[[2]](#footnote-2)

MC also bears some similarity to the following:

**PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE (PP):** When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.[[3]](#footnote-3)

MC is given in the same spirit as the precautionary principle.[[4]](#footnote-4) Both MC and PP recommend exercising caution, and both deal with situations of uncertainty. That said, there are some important differences between these principles as well. First, the principles differ with respect to the *kind* of ignorance or uncertainty at issue. Whereas PP deals with a kind of *empirical* ignorance (ignorance about the causal relationship between various events), MC concerns a *moral,* or normative,ignorance (a justified suspension of judgment about the moral wrongness of an action). Moral ignorance can be the result of empirical ignorance since we may fail to know whether an action is morally wrong because we do not know what its ramifications are, but moral ignorance can also occur in the absence of empirical ignorance. Sometimes it is unclear whether an action is morally wrong even if we stipulate all the empirical details.[[5]](#footnote-5) In addition, PP is generally seen as a principle to guide policy decisions, whereas MC can apply to both policy decisions and individual actions. For instance, while both MC and PP may have ramifications for offshore drilling policies, MC can also have ramifications for how you should spend your Saturday afternoon, unlike PP.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is also worth comparing MC to the following:

**MORAL RISK MINIMALISM (MRM):** You should not commit an action when there is an alternative action that is more likely to be morally right.[[7]](#footnote-7)

MRM and MC differ in important ways. While both principles may be seen as emphasizing the importance of moral caution, MRM is much more demanding than MC. According to MRM, it is wrong to ever commit an action when there is a more morally sure alternative. So, if action A is 89% likely to be morally permissible for S, while action B is 93% likely to be morally permissible for S, according to MRM, it is wrong for S to do A. This is so, even though action A is still 89% likely to be morally permissible. MRM forbids *any* degree of unnecessary moral risk. It requires taking *every* available precaution. In contrast, MC only forbids a particularly strong kind of moral risk. To meet the antecedent of MC the subject must be justified in either suspending or believing that an action is a serious moral wrong. So, for MC, the morally risky alternative must be *significantly* risky; risky enough to justify at least suspending judgment that it is a serious morally wrong. An action that is 89% likely to be morally permissible could not qualify as too risky to be permissible for MC (though it could for MRM given the right alternatives).[[8]](#footnote-8) So, MC is a principle that only forbids undertaking *significant* moral risks, which makes it both weaker and more plausible than MRM.[[9]](#footnote-9) A further difference is that MC claims that the wrongs in question are *moral* wrongs, whereas MRM is neutral on what kind of wrong is at issue. MRM and like principles are often understood to concern prudential reasons and the violation of a prudential norm or a violation of an all-things-considered wrong rather than simply a moral wrong, even if it being a moral wrong significantly affects what you prudentially, or all-things-considered, should do.[[10]](#footnote-10)

MC is a quite plausible moral principle. The idea that you should not take significant moral risks is quite intuitive, and MC captures this. To further MC’s plausibility, consider the following case:

**CAR CRUSHER**

Vlad is visiting a junkyard with a couple of his friends, and has been given the opportunity to operate their car compactor, which crushes cars into much smaller dimensions. After crushing a few cars, Vlad starts to get the hang of it. As he loads the next car into the car compactor Lola, Vlad’s friend, screams that her daughter had climbed into the car that Vlad just loaded into the compactor. Marco, Vlad’s other friend, claims that he hasn’t seen Lola’s daughter but that he’s quite sure that she isn’t in the car.

In this case, Vlad should suspend judgment as to whether Lola’s daughter is in the car, and so he should also suspend judgment as to whether it is a serious moral wrong to crush the car without first figuring out whether Lola’s daughter is inside. Crushing the car with Lola’s daughter inside would be a serious moral wrong. At the same time, Vlad knows that it is morally permissible to not crush the car right now. Vlad may have an urge to watch the car’s dimensions drastically diminish, but there is nothing morally wrong with holding off for a bit or not crushing the car altogether. Given these features of the case, it is clear that it would be morally wrong for Vlad to crush the car without first figuring out whether Lola’s daughter is inside – without first determining that it would not be a serious moral wrong to crush the car. Put differently, Vlad’s epistemic situation needs to change for it to be morally permissible for him to crush the car. It is worth noting that the moral wrongness of Vlad crushing the car does not depend upon whether Lola’s daughter is in fact in the car. Regardless of whether Lola’s daughter is in the car, Vlad’s epistemic situation prevents crushing the car from being a permissible choice at the time. What makes crushing the car at that time morally wrong is the epistemic situation that Vlad occupies. There is nothing in general that is morally wrong about crushing broken down cars. In fact, it may be that in general it is a good thing to do since it reduces the amount of wasted space they take up. However, crushing the car at that time would exercise *significant moral risk* for Vlad and would be morally reckless, and that’s what makes it morally wrong. Vlad’s epistemic context makes an otherwise morally permissible action morally impermissible for him. MC captures this verdict and nicely explains it.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. *Epistemology of Disagreement*

While plausible, MC might initially seem to have only fairly limited and uninteresting applications. That is, it might be thought that MC is a moral truth without very much bite. However, appreciating the epistemic significance of disagreement reveals that MC is indeed quite a substantial principle. While much of the literature in the epistemology of disagreement is focused on cases of peer disagreement, what is of relevance here is the more general state of expert opinion on a matter, or better, what one is justified in believing about the state of a debate.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To see how the epistemology of disagreement bears on MC, consider the following claims:

* 1. *Flossing promotes dental health*.
  2. *Climate change is real*.
  3. *There should be a ‘beef tax’.*

While (a), (b), and (c) are all controversial in some sense, the controversy surrounding each claim is importantly different. For instance, (a) is only controversial in that there is not a unanimous consensus that it is true. While 98/100 dentists may agree that flossing is an important part of good dental health, there always seems to be a few holdouts that prevent a unanimous verdict from obtaining. In contrast, while (b) enjoys a similarly strong degree of support amongst the relevant experts, (b) is much more controversial within society at large (at least within the US). Finally, (c) is quite controversial both amongst both the relevant experts and the population at large. These examples motivate the following distinctions between these various states of a debate surrounding a proposition:

**FULL CONSENSUS:** Every relevant expert agrees about p.

**PARTIAL CONSENSUS:** Full consensus is not achieved, but there is a clear dominant view amongst the relevant experts regarding p.

**DISARRAY:** The opinions of the relevant experts are sufficiently dispersed so as to prevent either full or partial consensus regarding p.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It’s not clear that any interesting claim enjoys full consensus (though, even if not, it is still possible that an individual is justified in believing that it does). However, this is not to say that we are never justified in forming a belief on the basis of our awareness of the state of expert opinion on the matter. In cases of partial consensus, it is reasonable to believe the dominant view amongst the relevant experts. More carefully, in cases where you are justified in believing that there is a clear dominant view amongst the relevant experts, you are also justified in adopting that view. The best explanation of such expert agreement is that they have converged on the truth.

Claims (a) and (b) are both claims that enjoy partial consensus. Once we are aware of this fact, it is reasonable for us to believe both (a) and (b) on that basis. Knowing the state of the debate regarding these claims is sufficient to make it reasonable for us to believe these claims. We don’t need to view or understand the relevant first-order evidence ourselves to be justified in believing these claims. Most individuals have not individually investigated the evidence for or against (a) or (b), or are even capable of competently evaluating the evidence if they so attempted. Relying on expertise is both necessary and common – it is part of the intellectual division of labor. If we needed to fully obtain and appreciate the evidence on any matter for ourselves before we could form a justified opinion on the matter, we would have very few justified beliefs and they would be within a quite limited range of topics. So, any non-skeptical view is committed to something like this reasoning.

However, while we are often justified in believing something on the basis of what we know about expert opinion on the matter, this is not always the case. When we are aware that a claim is in a state of disarray we (epistemically) should suspend judgment about that claim. For instance, being aware that (c) is in a state of disarray prevents me from being justified in believing (c) on the basis of an expert telling me that (c) is true. Given that (c) is in a state of disarray, it is somewhat a matter of luck that the expert I happened to run into believes (c). Further, being aware that (c) is in a state of disarray, I know that roughly as many experts on the matter disagree with my expert interlocutor as those that agree. Since these other experts are in roughly as good of an epistemic position on the matter as she is, her expert testimony comes to me defeated.

To help see this, imagine that I know of 10 expert sources regarding the deadline for submitting a paper to the next APA. Suppose that in this strange situation, I am aware that the 10 sources happen to be pretty evenly divided as to whether the deadline just passed. I then happen to run into one of the sources that tell me that the deadline has not yet passed. While I would ordinarily become justified in believing the deadline has not passed on the basis of this source’s testimony, my awareness of this fact being significantly disputed amongst the other expert sources I know of prevents me from being justified in believing the source’s testimony on this occasion.

A similar skeptical conclusion holds if I already have an opinion on the controversial matter. If I think about (c) for myself and come to believe that it is true, I am not justified in this belief if I am also aware that (c) is in a state of disarray (whether I am an expert or a novice on the matter). While I may see the evidence a certain way, if I am aware that the relevant expert community is pretty evenly divided on the matter, I have good reason to doubt my own evaluation of the evidence. In such cases, the disagreement is equally well explained by either side being the side in error. After all, the (other) experts are all better (or as good) at evaluating the relevant evidence, and there is no clear dominant view. So, when someone is justified in believing that a proposition is in a state of disarray, they are justified in suspending judgment about that proposition. If those best positioned epistemically on the matter have not been able to figure it out, and you are aware of this, then your belief on the matter is not justified. The only attitude that you are justified in adopting on the matter is suspension of judgment.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Notice that each of the above states (full consensus, partial consensus, disarray) is solely concerned with the state of *expert* opinion on the matter. A claim that is controversial amongst the general population but is fairly settled amongst the experts is not controversial in the sense relevant to our discussion. What it is reasonable to believe about a proposition depends upon what those in the best position to evaluate it believe about the matter. For instance, if the answer to a math problem is settled amongst the teachers, but quite controversial amongst the students, such controversy does not prevent a rational belief in the answer. So, the skeptical threat of disagreement comes from extensive disagreement amongst those *best positioned* to evaluate the truth of a matter, not a broader controversy amongst lay people.

1. *Applying Moral Caution*

While MC has limited application, it nevertheless has quite significant applications. These applications come by way of asymmetrical moral disagreements. Among the claims that are in a state of disarray are some moral claims. At the same time, we still have some moral knowledge (some moral claims are in a state of at least partial consensus). So, the relevant epistemic asymmetry sometimes obtains regarding moral propositions. In what follows I examine three plausible applications of MC: vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving.

*3.1 Vegetarianism*

Consider the following claim:

V: It is a serious moral wrong to consume meat in this context.

In many contexts, V is quite contentious; V is often in a state of disarray. There are many moral experts who believe V, and there are many moral experts who do not believe V. Many people on either side of the issue are informed, open-minded, and intelligent. Nevertheless disagreement persists. An awareness of this fact makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about V. If we are aware that those best positioned epistemically to determine the truth of V have not been able to collectively determine its truth, then we should suspend judgment about V.

An alternative to eating meat is not eating meat. Unlike with V, here there is no real controversy. Consider the following:

V\*: It is morally permissible to not consume meat in this context.

For most contexts in which we find ourselves, V\* is uncontroversial. Admittedly, there are some contexts in which not eating meat would cause one to die, and possible contexts where terrorists have threatened to blow up New York City unless you eat a steak, etc. In those contexts, we may be justified in suspending judgment or disbelieving V\*, but, those are not contexts we find ourselves in very often. For nearly every context we will find ourselves in, V\* will enjoy a kind of consensus. Debates about vegetarianism are typically debates about whether vegetarianism is *morally required*, not debates about whether vegetarianism is *morally permissible*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

So, regarding vegetarianism, our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of the debate, for almost all contexts you will find yourself in, you should suspend judgment that eating meat in this context is a serious moral wrong while you know that not eating meat is morally permissible. Given MC, it is morally wrong for you to eat meat in this context. Eating meat would be to exercise significant and unnecessary moral risk, and that’s morally wrong.

It is worth pausing to note some of the strengths and limitations of such an argument for the moral impermissibility of eating meat in most contexts. Such an argument is stronger than typical arguments for moral vegetarianism in that it does not rely on any controversial claims about animal rights or any particular assessment of how the consequences of the relevant alternative actions stack up. Given this, however, the argument also has a more limited application (at least in principle). According to the argument advanced here, it is *our current epistemic situation* with respect to the permissibility of the alternative actions that has it that we should not eat meat (in most contexts). This epistemic situation can change, and it can change in ways in which the antecedent of MC would fail to be met. This argument against eating meat (in most contexts) is not (at least directly) about it being morally wrong to so act. Rather, it is the fact that *in our current epistemic context*, doing so would be to take an unnecessarily large moral risk – and taking moral risks like that is morally impermissible.

Further, it may be tempting to move from the moral impermissibility of an action to legislating against such actions. While legality and morality are clearly distinct domains, some actions are illegal in large part because they are serious moral wrongs. However, while MC can be applied to show that eating meat (in most contexts) is morally wrong, MC cannot similarly be applied to show that we should make eating meat illegal. This can most clearly be seen by the fact that the relevant epistemic asymmetry does not obtain regarding the action of making eating meat (in most contexts) illegal. We do not know that making it illegal to eat meat (on most occasions) is morally permissible, since that proposition does not enjoy any kind of consensus amongst the relevant experts – it is too controversial. On the legal question, both alternatives are controversial so moral caution cannot be exercised in the relevant way. So, while MC provides an argument that eating meat (in most contexts) is morally wrong, it does not support the claim that we should legislate against eating meat (in most contexts).

*3.2 Abortion*

Consider the following claim:

A: It is a serious moral wrong to have an abortion in this context.

In many contexts, A is quite controversial; A is often in a state of disarray. There are many moral experts who believe A, and there are many moral experts who disbelieve A. Many on each side of this debate are intelligent, open-minded, and informed; nevertheless they disagree. An awareness of this fact makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about A. If we are aware that those best positioned to determine the truth of A have not collectively been able to figure it out, then we should suspend judgment about A.

However, an alternative to having an abortion is not having an abortion, and in many contexts this is uncontroversially permissible. Consider the following:

A\*: It is morally permissible to not have an abortion in this context.

For many contexts it is uncontroversial that A\* is true. Of course, there are some contexts where A\* is clearly false or is at least sufficiently controversial. Cases where the mother’s life is in jeopardy or the fetus’s well-being is significantly impaired are contexts where A\* is controversial. However, many contexts where an abortion is being considered are not like that. The debate about abortion is typically about whether abortion is *morally permissible*, not whether it is *morally required*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

So, regarding abortion our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of the debate, for many contexts, we should suspend judgment about whether having an abortion in this context is a serious moral wrong while we know that not having an abortion is morally permissible. Since the antecedent of MC is met in such contexts, it is morally wrong to have an abortion in such contexts.

Here too there are strengths and limitations to this argument. The argument is stronger than many in the abortion debate for the same conclusion since it does not rely on any controversial premise about the personhood status of a fetus or the rights that a fetus has in virtue of being a potential person. All such metaphysical issues are avoided by appealing to MC instead. This argument does have a more limited application since its deployment here too depends upon *our epistemic situation*, and this can change. It may be that a sufficient consensus is reached about the permissibility of abortion (in most contexts), and given shifting opinions this may be sooner rather than later.

In addition, this argument against the permissibility of abortion does not extend to the issue of whether abortions (in most contexts) should be illegal. Regarding the legal issue, MC will fail to deliver a verdict since there is a great deal of controversy surrounding the issue of whether abortions (in most contexts) should be legal, as well as whether they should be illegal. Our requisite epistemic asymmetry is not met regarding the legal issue. On the legal issue there are clear moral risks either way, preventing moral caution from being exercised. So, the argument on offer has application only to individual acts of abortion.

*3.3 Charitable Giving*

Consider the following claim:

C: It is a serious moral wrong to not give more to charity in this context.

In many contexts C is quite controversial amongst the relevant experts. C is often in a state of disarray. There are many open-minded, intelligent and informed individuals who believe C, and many who do not. An awareness of the fact that C is in a state of disarray makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about C.

However, an alternative to C is rather uncontroversial.

C\*: It is morally permissible to give more to charity in this context.

For almost all contexts we will find ourselves in, C\* enjoys some kind of consensus. Sure, there are some possible contexts where giving any more to help those in need would put one’s family in real jeopardy or would sacrifice one’s own well being in a morally significant way, and in such cases it may be reasonable to suspend judgment or disbelieve C\*. But, such contexts are quite rare (at least for those reading this paper). Nearly every context we will find ourselves in will be one in which C\* is uncontroversially true. The debates about our responsibilities to those in poverty are typically about whether it is morally wrong to *not* give more, not whether it would be morally wrong to give any more than we have already given.[[17]](#footnote-17)

So, here too our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of debate, for almost all contexts we will find ourselves in, we should suspend judgment that not giving more is a serious wrong, while we know that it is morally permissible for us to give more. For almost all contexts the antecedent of MC is met on this issue, so in those contexts it is morally wrong for us to not give more.

A strength of this argument is that it establishes its conclusion without relying on any controversial consequentialist premise that may be feared to overgeneralize. It is often wondered regarding charitable giving, ‘where do we draw the line?’ MC comes with an answer to that question that is more moderate than many extant answers, though it remains quite demanding. In Singer’s classic argument, the line is drawn at a level of marginal utility, where giving more would cause oneself harm comparable to the harm one would be preventing.[[18]](#footnote-18) In contrast, MC draws the line where it would be contentious whether giving more in that context is morally wrong. It will become contentious that giving more is wrong much earlier than the line of marginal utility. However, this is not to say that the application of MC does not have dramatic moral consequences here. While more moderate than other arguments about charitable giving, MC is still quite demanding. Most people would have to give quite a lot before it would become contentious that giving any more is a serious moral wrong.

While our epistemic asymmetry obtains regarding individual acts of giving to charity, the same is not true of legally mandated charitable donations (at least to the extent required on the individual level by MC). The permissibility of extensive state mandated charitable giving is quite contentious, so our epistemic asymmetry does not obtain regarding the legal issue. Here too, the clear permissibility of the individual action does not translate to a clearly permissible public policy.

1. *Objections*

Having seen some of the significant applications of MC, it might be thought that while the principle is *prima facie* plausible it now requires much greater scrutiny. In particular, there are several objections to MC that should be addressed.[[19]](#footnote-19)

*4.1 Problem of Moral Deference*

Our application of MC came by way of the epistemic significance of disagreement and the claim that when an expert community is in a state of disarray about the truth of some proposition, it is rational to suspend judgment about that proposition. Some have thought that while this may be true in general, it is not true of *ethical propositions* in particular. Here the claim is that there are features of ethical beliefs that render them invulnerable to the opinions of others. Some motivation for such a claim has come from thinking about the problem of pure moral deference.[[20]](#footnote-20) Some have found there to be something amiss about taking on the moral belief of another simply on their say so. While deferring to climate change experts on matters of climate or to experts on dental health on matters of dental hygiene seem unproblematic, the claim is that the same is not true with regards to moral claims. Since the moral opinions of others played a significant role in the argument above, problems with moral deference may seem to raise trouble for the view on offer.

While there is a great deal to engage with in the debate about moral deference, the issues there can be sidestepped for the purposes of the argument here. First, it is clear that the moral views of others should have *some* influence on our moral beliefs. Moral education and moral dialogue are both critically important to our intellectual lives. Having one’s moral beliefs developed and maintained in isolation is far from an epistemic ideal. So, if there is anything wrong with moral deference, it is not that we should avoid having our moral views influenced by what others think. Second, while there are good reasons to resist the claim that moral deference is inappropriate[[21]](#footnote-21), it is sufficient for our purposes here to note that worries about moral deference fail to engage with the central argument. What is at issue here is not *taking on* moral beliefs on the basis of others, but rather, the *defeating effects* that our awareness of a contentious state of a debate can have for the justification of our own moral beliefs.[[22]](#footnote-22) Even if coming to *believe* a moral proposition simply on someone else’s say-so is problematic, seeing disagreement as having defeating effects on moral beliefs does not raise a similar concern. The antecedent of MC can be met without anyone *believing* a moral claim just because someone else said so. No beliefs need to be taken on at all. It is important that the opinions of others can *defeat* the justificatory status of some beliefs, but this can happen without any new beliefs being formed or any moral deference taking place.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It might be easier to see that any issues with moral deference can be sidestepped here by examining one of the more plausible problems with moral deference. Some have argued that moral deference is problematic since it obscures moral understanding and the cultivation of moral virtue.[[24]](#footnote-24) If you believe a moral proposition simply on someone else’s say-so, then you fail to understand *why* it is true, and you cannot act accordingly for the right reasons (since you don’t have those reasons). While these may be deficiencies of moral beliefs formed on the basis of deference, they fail to raise a problem for the argument at hand. What is relevant for the argument here is simply the justificatory status of certain moral propositions, and any lack of understanding or virtue is simply a separate issue. The point at issue here regarding the influence of the opinions of others is merely an epistemic one – it only concerns the justificatory status of a proposition. Your moral beliefs being unjustified due to pervasive disagreement is far from ‘taking your morality from someone else’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Further, while you may form moral beliefs by way of appreciating the relevant controversies and applying MC (e.g. the belief that it is morally wrong for me to eat meat in this context), those beliefs are not formed *merely* on the basis of someone else’s say-so. While the opinions of others do factor into the formation of those beliefs, you are not believing a moral claim *just because* someone else said so. Rather, you are reasoning to that conclusion *for yourself*, where the opinions of others are simply some information relevant to that reasoning. In addition, even though you have arrived at that belief (in part) by way of appreciating the opinions of others, you have not done so in a way that precludes you from understanding why it is true. You can understand that it is wrong to eat meat, for example, because doing so would involve exercising excessive moral risk.

*4.2 Moral and Non-Moral Ignorance*

Some have claimed that there is an important difference between cases of moral ignorance due to non-moral ignorance and cases of ‘pure moral ignorance’.[[26]](#footnote-26) A case of pure moral ignorance is one where one is justified in suspending judgment about a moral proposition but *not* in virtue of being justified in suspending judgment about any non-moral proposition. So, pure moral ignorance involves a kind of uncertainty about moral matters without such an accompanying uncertainty about the relevant empirical matters. The objection here is that cases of pure moral ignorance should not affect our actions. When we are ignorant of the empirical details, that should matter, but there is nothing wrong with taking ‘pure moral risks’.

MC does not distinguish cases of pure moral ignorance from other cases of moral ignorance. What mattered for MC is that you should suspend judgment about the moral status of an action, regardless of the reasons why this is the case – regardless of whether this is due to empirical ignorance or not. The motivation given for MC came by way of a case involving empirical ignorance. In Car Crusher, Vlad is ignorant as to whether Lola’s daughter is in the car – an important empirical detail. So, it might be thought that MC has smuggled in cases of pure moral ignorance without sufficient reason to do so.

Why might cases of pure moral ignorance be different? Weatherson (2014), following Smith (1994), distinguishes between *de re* and *de dicto* desires. He claims that we should want to do the right thing *for the reasons that* it is the right thing to do, *not simply because* it is the right thing to do. So, you should save the drowning child not simply because it is the right thing to do, but because children are valuable and there’s a child in need of your help. Given this distinction, Weatherson claims that being risk averse in ways like MC recommends results in a kind of moral fetishism, and that those that act accordingly fail to desire to do the right thing for the right reasons.

While Weatherson is right that one should do an action for the right reasons, this response simply assumes that taking certain moral risks is not what makes some actions wrong. If excessive moral riskiness is morally wrong, then following a principle like MC does not amount to moral fetishism since one is paying attention to the wrong making feature of the act in question. If MC is correct, then following its prescriptions is not simply trying to be moral for morality’s sake, but acting morally for the very reason why it is moral to so act. So, Weatherson’s argument fails to gain traction here since the very point at issue is whether such moral risk is itself morally wrong. If taking excessive moral risk is morally wrong, then avoiding an action because it is too risky is not doing the moral thing just because it is moral, it is doing the moral thing for the reasons why it is the moral thing to do.[[27]](#footnote-27)

We can also see that MC gives correct verdicts in cases of pure moral ignorance. While cases of pure moral ignorance are much harder to come by, we can see that the verdicts of MC hold as well. Consider the following.

**Trina’s Travels**

Trina is travelling for work. When she travels for work, her work covers her travel costs upon receiving the receipts. On this trip, Trina has a particularly bad travel experience. Her travel experience is so bad that the airlines refunds the price of her return trip. Upon returning home, Trina is thinking about whether she should still submit the original receipt to her work since the refund was intended as compensation for a bad experience. Trina talks things over with her good friend Lesley. Trina and Lesley disagree about what is morally permissible here even though they agree about all the non-moral facts relevant to the issue.

In this case, we can suppose that Trina is justified in suspending judgment regarding the claim that submitting the receipts is a serious moral wrong while at the same time she knows that refraining from doing so is morally permissible. Given all of that, it would be morally wrong for her to submit the original receipts. Doing so would be to exhibit serious and unnecessary moral risk. This is true regardless of the fact that the relevant underlying empirical details are known.

One might push back here and claim that the relevant empirical details are *not* known since the consequences of Trina’s actions have an important moral bearing and neither Trina nor Lesley knows what would happen if she submitted the original receipts. It is true that neither knows how things will turn out if Trina submits the receipts, but we can suppose that both know that she would be reimbursed and nothing else would come of it. So, the only worries here are moral worries, not worries about her job security or what her dean will think. Even with this additional supposition it seems that Trina (morally) should not submit the receipts. If the objector further pushes back that *even more* information about how things will turn out is needed for all of the empirical details to be sufficiently known, then the relevance of the distinction between pure moral ignorance cases and other cases of moral ignorance disappears. The more that is added into the empirical details that must be known, the rarer the cases of pure moral ignorance become. The applications of moral caution examined in this paper all contain at least as much empirical ignorance as the amended case of Trina’s Travels. So, any distinction between moral and non-moral ignorance that relies on further details will not be relevant for our purposes of applying moral caution – the striking consequences regarding vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving would all remain.

Further, it is not plausible that any additional piece of empirical information would alter what Trina should do, so long as she remains in the moral disagreement and is justified in suspending judgment about the morality of the act in question. Coming to learn some empirical information without thereby becoming justified in believing something about morality will not change what Trina should do. So, however restrictive one is in their understanding of cases of pure moral ignorance, it is implausible that those cases differ in any relevant way from other cases of moral ignorance.[[28]](#footnote-28)

*4.3 Moral Progress*

A final worry with MC is that it simply gets the cases wrong. While some may find (at least some of) the applications above quite troubling, the worry here is that there are even *more troubling* applications of MC. To see such troubling applications we need only envisage an intellectual context where the moral experts are seriously confused about the morality of some action. For instance, we can imagine a situation where it is highly controversial whether interracial marriage is a serious moral wrong.[[29]](#footnote-29) Remaining single appears to be a clearly permissible alternative to marrying, so we can imagine a case where our subject is thinking about entering an interracial marriage. He recognizes that the moral experts he knows of are in a state of disarray about the morality of interracial marriage, and he knows that remaining single is a morally permissible alternative. MC thus seems to have it that it would be morally wrong for him to enter into this interracial union. Since we know that there is nothing morally wrong with interracial relations, this may strike us as the wrong verdict and a decisive counterexample to MC. Recall that MC renders its moral verdicts not by finding anything inherently morally wrong with the action in question, but by identifying it as a significant and unnecessary moral risk. MC can *restrict* the range of morally permissible alternatives, and this seems to be exactly what is going on in the imagined scenario.[[30]](#footnote-30)

There are two lines of response to this objection: *the hardline response* and *the moderate response*. The hardline response simply bites the bullet. Since MC is a morally restrictive principle, there will be cases where otherwise permissible actions are made impermissible due to the fact that they would exhibit problematic moral risk. This is unfortunate, but some unfortunate things are true. What MC points out, is that our intellectual context is incredibly important. In impoverished intellectual contexts there will be unfortunate consequences – acts that would otherwise be permissible can be rendered impermissible. This consequence highlights the importance of good ethical thinking. Since the state of our intellectual community has ramifications for which actions are morally permissible, the state of the intellectual community is of greatimportance.[[31]](#footnote-31) The ramifications of a bad intellectual community are not purely epistemic, there can be bad *moral* consequences as well (e.g. otherwise permissible actions made impermissible). Bad intellectual contexts can come with *moral* harms, and sometimes intellectual change must precede moral change. Returning to Car Crusher, Vlad’s epistemic situation needed to improve before certain actions opened up to him as morally permissible alternatives. Just as there can be moral victims of a bad political arrangement, so too can there be moral victims of a bad intellectual arrangement.[[32]](#footnote-32) In both cases, we should strive to make changes at the relevant level, and until those changes are made the problems will persist. This is the hardline response.[[33]](#footnote-33)

According to the moderate response, MC should be slightly weakened. Consider the following amended principle:

**WEAK MORAL CAUTION (WMC):** Having considered the moral status of doing action A in context C, if (i) subject S (epistemically) should believe or suspend judgment that doing A in C is a serious moral wrong, while (ii) S knows that refraining from doing A in C is not morally wrong and *is of no significant moral cost to the agent*, then S (morally) should not do A in C.[[34]](#footnote-34)

WMC adds the clause “and is of no significant moral cost to the agent” to condition (ii) of MC. This amendment has it that exercising moral caution does not require the agent to sacrifice anything of significant moral value. If refraining from doing A in C would require S to sacrifice something of significant moral value, WMC simply does not apply. So, this amendment to moral caution decreases its demandingness. In the above scenario regarding interracial marriage, WMC does not offer any prescriptions. While there is undoubtably vagueness surrounding what counts as a significant moral cost, there are nevertheless clear cases. Getting precise on what counts as a significant moral cost will be important in determining borderline cases, but many cases will have clear application without being precise here. For instance, not entering a meaningful interracial relationship would be a significant moral cost on any plausible unpacking of the concept. As such, WMC does not give any prescriptions in the above case and thus avoids the uncomfortable consequences that MC has in the envisioned scenario. Moving to WMC from MC thus avoids the uncomfortable result altogether.[[35]](#footnote-35)

One might worry here that such a move also takes away the substantive consequences of exercising moral caution regarding vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving. Let’s consider the three applications in turn. Regarding vegetarianism, adding the condition that the action in question is of no significant moral cost to the agent does not appear to significantly affect the application of moral caution. It may be argued that not eating meat in certain religious or cultural contexts would be a significant moral cost, but even if so, many contexts will still be such that it is morally wrong to eat meat. In most scenarios, not eating meat on the occasion would not be of significant moral cost to the agent on any plausible construal of ‘significant moral cost’. Regarding charitable giving, the weakened principle has a less extensive application, but the application is still quite significant.[[36]](#footnote-36) Most readers can give a substantial amount of their resources without having to sacrifice something of significant moral value. Regarding abortion, the move to WMC does appear to significantly alter the application of moral caution. It is plausible that utilizing your body to grow another organism does come with significant moral cost to the agent. So, regarding abortion, WMC does appear to have a more limited application than MC. Even so, WMC does offer to shift the debate about the permissibility of abortion to a debate about what counts as a significant moral cost.[[37]](#footnote-37)

So, there are two routes of response to the worry about moral progress. On either response, exercising moral caution will still have significant consequences for what it is morally permissible to do. Even weakening MC to WMC comes with significant consequences for how we should live our lives.

1. *Conclusion*

It is quite plausible that we should exercise moral caution. While the claim that it is morally wrong to exercise significant moral risk may initially seem trivial and uninteresting, an appreciation of the epistemic significance of disagreement reveals that such a principle has striking implications. I have argued that the principle of moral caution has it that we should not eat meat (in most contexts), and refrain from giving more to charity (in most contexts). Its consequences for the abortion debate will depend upon which version of moral caution is correct.[[38]](#footnote-38)

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1. Matheson (2016). MC applies to situations where the subject has considered the moral status of a certain action in a context. This is to avoid MC applying in some cases where it might be that the subject is justified in suspending judgment regarding the relevant claim, but the issue has simply never crossed their mind. MC takes no stand on the moral status of actions in such unreflective contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a critical discussion of principles like CF, see Field (2019), Guerrero (2007), Harman (2015), and Weatherson (2014). Whether similar considerations apply to MC will be considered below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the Wingspread Statement of the precautionary principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the precautionary principle, see Bodansky (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. More on this distinction below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For additional comparisons of MC with the precautionary principle, see Matheson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A principle like this is defended in Lockhart (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It should be noted that there is no clear and uncontroversial connection between probabilities, or credences, and tripartite doxastic attitudes (belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment). Here I am taking it an 89% likelihood would fall above any threshold for suspension of judgment. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Much of the literature on moral uncertainty surrounds ‘certaintist’ principles like MRM. For a further discussion on such principles, see Harman (2015), Sepielli (2014; 2016), and Weatherson (2014). Many objections to certaintist principles like MRM involve cases where the agent is quite sure, though not certain, that a certain course of action is morally permissible yet the principle in question forbids the action. For instance, see Weatherson (2014). Such objections fail to gain traction on MC since cases where one is (justifiably) quite certain that an action is permissible will not be cases where the antecedent of MC is met. The degree of moral risk that MC forbids is very significant and unnecessary moral risk. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. MC is also bears some similarity to Guerrero’s (2007) Don’t Know, Don’t Kill principle (DKDK): “If someone knows that they don’t know whether a living organism has significant moral status or not, it is morally blameworthy for her to kill that organism, or to have it killed, unless she believes that there is something of substantial moral significance compelling her to do so.” (78-9) DKDK differs from MC in some important ways. For one thing, DKDK is only about killing. The antecedent of DKDK is both stronger and weaker than MC. DKDK requires that one *not know* that the action in question is a moral wrong, and there are ways of failing to know that do not amount to a justified suspension of judgment in the target proposition. However, DKDK also requires that one *know* that one does not know the moral status. This higher-order requirement makes it harder to meet the antecedent of DKDK. Finally, unlike MC, DKDK forbids certain actions even when there isn’t a known permissible alternative. In this way, it is stronger than MC. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We can imagine that there are two separate remotes for crushing the car. Vlad has one, and Uri has the other. Suppose that unlike Vlad, Uri *does* know that Lola’s daughter is not in the car. Suppose that Uri crushes the car. While in some sense this is the very action that would be wrong for Vlad to perform, Uri’s improved epistemic position over Vlad has made all the difference. What Uri does is morally permissible, since in doing so he does not exhibit significant moral risk. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a nice survey of the arguments from moral disagreement to moral skepticism, see Joyce (2017). For more on the particular argument deployed here, see Carey and Matheson (2013), Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This follows McElreath, Nobis, and Matheson (2018). It is worth noting that being in a state of disarray is a binary characteristic. A proposition either is, or is not, in a state of disarray. While the feature that puts a proposition into a state of disarray (the extent of the disagreement) is graded, a proposition is only in a state of disarray when it is sufficiently controversial. There are also additional states that a debate may be in that include the distribution of opinions of non-experts. For reasons that will follow, those are being ignored here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This line of reasoning closely parallels Carey and Matheson (2013) and Matheson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For some who see vegetarianism as morally problematic, see Davis (2003) and Zamir (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Benetar (2008) is a notable exception. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hobson (2016) is perhaps an exception here. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Singer (1972). Singer also gives a more moderate line, where giving more would sacrifice something of significant moral value. We will examine a parallel version of MC below. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a defense of MC against several other objections, see Matheson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See McGrath (2008) and Hills (2009; 2013). For different considerations in favor of this conclusion, see Setiya (2012). For a response, see Rowland (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Enoch (2009) for one such argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See also Rowland (2017) for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For instance, suppose that Ted believes that eating meat is permissible but is aware of the controversy. To meet the condition (i) of MC, Ted need not give up his belief. To meet (i) it simply must be true that the attitude that Ted is justified in adopting toward the proposition <eating meat in this context is permissible> is suspension of judgment. So, meeting (i) of MC does not require a *doxastic* condition, only an *epistemic* condition – that disbelief or suspension is the justified attitude to adopt toward the relevant proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Hills (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For more on this point, see Rowland (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Weatherson (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Weatherson also motivates his central claim by appealing to the implausibility of needing to constantly check the latest journals to see what people are saying about the relative importance of various moral principles in order to determine what to do. While this does not seem entirely implausible to me, the view on the table isn’t committed to such a consequence. While disagreement in philosophy is ubiquitous, it is also fairly stable. Disagreements in philosophy are not so volatile that one must constantly check and update the state of the debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This is not to say that everyone will share these same intuitive verdicts. However, even in making his case against the moral wrongness of moral risk, Weatherson acknowledges the intuitive appeal that cases of exercising moral caution have. He attempts to undercut these intuitions by noting that they have been used to support some false principles of action. However, if the motivation coming from such cases can be captured by a more plausible principle, like MC, then we lose such a reason to distrust these intuitions. The fact that these intutions can be misapplied does not mean they should be disregarded. I agree that the principles that Weatherson rejects should be rejected, but I think that MC can capture the relevant intuitions without the implausible consequences of the principles that Weatherson explores. For a further response to Weatherson on this point, see Field (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This follows an objection examined in Matheson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. It is important to not make this putative counterexample too easy. In order for MC to be met, it is important that the community that believes that interracial relations are morally wrong are not simply those in power, but that our subject is justified in believing that they are in the best epistemic position to determine the truth of the matter. So, the intellectual contexts that most quickly come to mind are not likely to satisfy MC. If our subject has a justified error theory about why the majority has the moral beliefs that they do, MC will not apply. For more on this point, see Bergmann (2009) and Sherman (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For more on this point see Fricker’s (2007) discussion of bad epistemic circumstantial luck. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Perhaps this is a new kind of epistemic injustice. See Fricker (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. It is also worth noting that MC is not alone in this consequence, both CF and MRM leave open the possibility of such a scenario obtaining. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rowland (2017) suggests a similar clause be added to MC. Rowland’s suggestion is ‘and refraining from doing A would not be extremely costly’. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Guerrero (2007) for a similar qualification. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The weakening of moral caution mirrors Singer’s (1972) more moderate version of his principle regarding charitable giving. As Singer notes there, even such a moderate principle has quite significant ramifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. One might worry that a liability of WMC is that it does not come with an explicit account of what a significant moral cost is. Rather than a liability, this is an asset. Just as MC accommodated disparate accounts of epistemic justification, WMC can accommodate disparate accounts of significant moral cost. While borderline cases will not be settled without an explicit account, many of the applications examined here are not plausibly borderline cases of significant moral sacrifice. See also Guerrero (2007) on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This paper benefitted from feedback from a number of individuals: Brandon Carey, David Killoren, Zoe Johnson King, Andrew Moon, Richard Rowland, Joshua Smith, Sarah Vincent, participants at the ACU Melbourne workshop *Moral Disagreements: Philosophical and Practical Implications*, participants at the Bonn *Disagreement Within Philosophy Workshop*, audiences at the University of Florida and University of Richmond, as well as several anonymous referees.  [↑](#footnote-ref-38)