**Metaethical Agnosticism:**

**Practical Reasons for Acting When Agnostic About the Existence of Moral Reasons**

Pre-published Draft

(Published in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, January 2019)

**Joseph Len Miller**

*1. Introduction*

Intuitively, some things clearly *seem* morally wrong (e.g., genocide, murder, slavery, etc.). However, it’s much less intuitive how exactly moral reasons could exist. It may seem that before knowing whether something is morally wrong we would have to know whether moral reasons actually exist. Without knowing whether there are moral reasons, it is hard to see how to make decisions in the face of things that seem morally wrong.

In this paper I will argue that despite being uncertain about the existence of moral reasons, someone can still have a practical reason to act in a particular way when facing certain moral choices. By ‘reason’ I mean something that counts in favor of acting in a particular way, and the kind of uncertainty I will be discussing is agnosticism. ‘Agnostic’ will be used to describe an agent when they are abstaining from belief. Just like someone who is agnostic about the existence of God abstains from believing either that God does or doesn’t exist, someone who is morally agnostic believes some action is either morally permissible or morally impermissible, but don’t think one option is more likely than the other. In situations like these, I will argue, there can still be a *morally relevant* practical reason to favor one action over the other. As will be argued, this practical reason is morally relevant because it will have an impact on whether we’re making the correct moral decision (if there is a correct moral decision).

This practical reason will result from a principle of decision-making that can be used when someone is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons. Being agnostic about the existence of moral reasons will be referred to as ‘metaethical agnosticism.’ While principles for acting have been advocated in other decision-making contexts, there has been little discussion about how to act when uncertain about the existence of *moral reasons* in general. The aims of this paper include explicitly beginning the discussion about this topic and advocating for a principle of moral decision-making that should be used despite being agnostic whether moral reasons exist.

Before making my argument, I will make some preliminary distinctions to help narrow the scope of the paper (§1.1). After these distinctions have been made I will provide an outline of the structure for the rest of the paper (§1.2).

*1.1 Kinds of Uncertainty*

There are at least two ways in which someone might be uncertain. They can be uncertain about non-normative factual details (call this *non-normative uncertainty*), and they can be uncertain about the reasons that the non-normative facts give us (call this *normative uncertainty*).[[1]](#footnote-1) Someone can know everything there is to know about the descriptive details of a particular situation, but still be uncertain about what moral reasons these details give us. Sepielli uses abortion as an example: “someone might be uncertain about the permissibility of abortion, even if she were certain about the science of fetal development, the kind of life a child born to her would lead, and so on.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition to the distinction between non-normative and normative uncertainty, there are at least three different levels at which we can be normatively uncertain. We can be uncertain about particular cases or situations (like the permissibility of abortion and eating meat); we can be uncertain about which moral theory is correct; and we can be uncertain about the nature of morality. For the sake of simplicity, we can think of these three levels of uncertainty as being distinguished by the differences between applied ethics, normative ethics, and metaethics. First, uncertainty at the level of applied ethics is being uncertain about what moral reasons the non-normative facts give us in particular cases or situations, or about the weight of those reasons.[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, uncertainty at the level of normative ethics is being uncertain about which moral theory best tells us what counts as a moral reason.[[4]](#footnote-4) Lastly, uncertainty at the level of metaethics is being uncertain about the nature or status of moral reasons in general (e.g., do they exist, and, if so, how?). These levels of uncertainty will be referred to as *applicatory uncertainty*, *theoretical uncertainty*, and *metaethical uncertainty*, respectively. While applicatory uncertainty and theoretical uncertainty have been given the most amount of attention in the literature, metaethical uncertainty has not yet been directly discussed. Part of the aim of this paper is to start discussions of metaethical uncertainty.

I don’t intend to give a full account or explanation of the different kinds of uncertainty or of the relationships between the levels of normative uncertainty. I just hope this brief explanation helps to make these distinctions and relations more intuitive to the reader. While there may be different ways that someone can be uncertain, I will only be discussing situations where an agent is *agnostic*. In this context, agnosticism is a kind of uncertainty where an agent is no more inclined to accept P than to accept not-P. As will be explained later, I will also only be concerned with the relationship between the applicatory and metaethical levels of uncertainty. In particular, I will focus on situations where an agent has *knowledge* at the applicatory level while being *agnostic* at the metaethical level. As the argument proceeds, I will explain how this particular relationship between levels of uncertainty is plausible.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Given these distinctions, we can also distinguish between at least two different questions that arise when discussing normative uncertainty. The two most discussed questions in the literature that arise on any level of normative uncertainty have to do with either moral responsibility or reasons for action. Questions concerning whether someone can be held accountable for acting in the face of moral uncertainty, or whether the kind of uncertainty (normative or non-normative) matters in assigning praise or blame, we can refer to as *questions of responsibility*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whether moral uncertainty can be used as a reason to act, how we should act in particular situations in which we are uncertain, what kinds of considerations should be taken into account when faced with making a decision under uncertainty, etc. we can refer to as *questions of action*. I will only be dealing with questions of action. In evaluating questions of action, it is not necessary that we consider questions of responsibility. We can assess how someone ought to act without needing to ask whether they should or would be praised or blamed for acting that way. While I will not be making much of an argument for this point (as it’s beyond the scope of this paper), I will say that that in assessing whether someone should be praised or blamed for some action it makes sense to ask “how ought that person to have acted?” In other words, it seems fine for questions of responsibility to take questions of action into account. However, in assessing how someone ought to act it seems less appropriate to ask “could that person be praised or blamed for acting in that particular way?” While reasons in favor of doing some action might be the same reasons to praise or blame someone, the blame or praise itself doesn’t seem to be the primary factor in determining how to act.

*1.2 Outline*

 Now that these distinctions have been made, I can be more specific regarding the argument I will make in this paper: I will argue that despite normative uncertainty at the metaethical level (in the form of metaethical agnosticism), someone can still have a practical reason to act in a particular way. As such, I will be focused solely on questions of action, and the only kind of uncertainty I will be discussing is agnosticism at the metaethical level. First, I will give a more detailed explanation of metaethical agnosticism (§2) by providing an example of what metaethical agnosticism would look like (§2.1). This will be followed by my argument about how, despite metaethical agnosticism, there is still a practical reason to act in a particular way (under two certain conditions) (§3). The two conditions that need to be satisfied will then be explained (§3.1), followed by a contrast between acting under metaethical agnosticism and other similar principles for action (§3.2). Finally, I will address some objections that apply to these similar principles (§4).

*2. Explaining Metaethical Agnosticism*

Notice, if someone is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons, this agnosticism is enough to make moral reasons (if they exist) unavailable to that agent. If they are unavailable, then they cannot be used in deciding how to act. The problem does not arise from doubting whether some reasons count in favor of doing one thing rather than another – it arises from doubting the existence of a particular kind of reason (i.e., moral reasons). While an agent may use other reasons for choosing one act over another, it does not seem that those reasons can be *moral* reasons for the agent if they doubt the existence of moral reasons. If the agent knew, *or even believed*, that moral reasons existed, then those reasons could be used when deciding how to act. Even if the agent has false moral beliefs (e.g., assume that moral reasons don’t exist, and that all moral beliefs are then false), they can still use those beliefs in deciding how they ought to act. What is not clear, and partly the aim of this paper, is whether someone can have a morally relevant reason to act when they are agnostic about the existence of moral reasons.

*2.1 What Does Metaethical Agnosticism Look Like?*

 To help further explain the structure of metaethical agnosticism and why it is a problem I will provide an example.[[7]](#footnote-7) This example is meant to show how common it can be to have to decide how to act while metaethically agnostic.

*Example:* Minnie is an undergraduate taking her first ethics course. She has just read a bunch of articles on metaethics, and she is agnostic about whether moral reasons exist. However, the class is now assigned to read some articles about the morality of eating meat. After reading these articles, Minnie is convinced that, if moral reasons exist, she should not be eating meat, though she is still agnostic about whether moral reasons exist.

 In this example Minnie has what appears to be a moral belief: if moral reasons exist, then she should not be eating meat. She believes that eating meat *would* be morally wrong (if moral reasons exist) – it is not just wrong for health or aesthetic reasons.

Now say Minnie is faced with a situation where she has to make a choice whether she eats meat. If Minnie believed either that moral reasons exist or that they do not exist, she would be able to easily make this decision. However, since she is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons, it is not clear how she should decide between the two options.

 Given that Minnie is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons, it seems like she lacks the tools to make the decision in a morally appropriate way (e.g., by using or appealing to moral reasons). As was stated earlier, this is concerning partially because when we are making moral decisions we are concerned with making the *correct* decision. Although she could decide that both acts are equally permissible choices given her agnosticism about the existence of moral reasons,[[8]](#footnote-8) she believes that eating meat would be morally wrong if moral reasons exist. She is, however, still agnostic about the existence of moral reasons.

*3. How to Act Under Metaethical Agnosticism*

 For situations like the example, I will argue for the use of a particular principle in deciding how to act. This principle, which I will refer to as The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism (or, more briefly, as PAUMA), will be limited in scope by two conditions. If these two conditions are satisfied, then PAUMA should be used to make a decision of how to act. The principle can be stated as follows:

*The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism (PAUMA)*: When having to decide between either acting in a way that is known to be wrong, if moral reasons exist, or acting in a way that is not known to be morally wrong, you should (rationally) choose to act in the way not known to be morally wrong.

Under the requisite conditions, this principle, though itself not being a moral principle, at least provides an agent a morally relevant practical reason to act because it provides them the best chance of making the morally right choice if moral reasons exist.

*3.1 Two Conditions for Having a Practical Reason to Act (Despite Metaethical Agnosticism)*

Given the problem posed by metaethical agnosticism, it would seem that we are lacking an *appropriate* way of deciding how to act in when we’re metaethically agnostic. However, as I will argue, as long as the following two conditions are met, PAUMA can still provide a *practical* reason to act in a particular way. This practical reason should be used when deciding how to act since it allows people to act in a way that is most likely morally correct in a given situation.

One assumption needs to be made clear before I begin. I am going to make the seemingly simple assumption that wrong things, *if they exist*, ought to be avoided, other things being equal. This assumption is important because without it there would be no need to worry about whether we are choosing a potentially wrong option as opposed to a morally permissible option in cases of metaethical uncertainty. This assumption is what makes acting in a particular way the result of a practical reason. Since wrong things ought to be avoided, if moral reasons exist, then we have a practical reason to avoid doing wrong things. This assumption is what will make it practically rational to avoid the possibly wrong choice in cases of metaethical agnosticism.

In addition to this assumption, the two conditions that need to be met for PAUMA to serve as a practical reason are (1) there needs to be agnosticism about the existence of moral reasons (i.e., the agnosticism has to consist of thinking either that moral reasons exist or they do not, but not being sure which is correct), and (2) there has to be knowledge of certain conditional first-order moral claims (e.g., *if* moral reasons exist, then *x* would be wrong). Each of these will be discussed in turn.

*3.1.1 Condition 1: Agnosticism about the Existence of Moral Reasons*

 Condition 1 makes clear the importance of genuine agnosticism regarding the existence of moral reasons. Someone has to believe that either moral reasons exist or they do not. They cannot think one option is more likely than the other. This condition is important because if someone either thought that moral reasons existed or thought that they did not exist, then no problem arises concerning how they ought to act in situations like those in the example.

If someone thought that moral reasons existed, then they could make a decision and choose to act in the way that they believe to be morally permissible. Even if it turns out that that decision is morally wrong, there is still no problem concerning their decision of how to act *given* the beliefs they had.

On the other hand, if someone thought moral reasons did not exist, then there would be no moral difference between two actions that are otherwise equally reasonable. With regard to moral reasons, either option would be the appropriate action since there is no moral standard that distinguishes one from the other. Although there may be non-moral reasons to think one option is better than the other, if either option is equally reasonable when considering moral reasons, then there is no problem of choosing between the two on that basis because moral reasons do not exist– either option is fine.

*3.1.2 Condition 2: Conditional First-Order Moral Claims*

Condition 2 states that some specific first-order moral beliefs have to be held by the person deciding how to act. These beliefs have to constitute knowledge, and they have to be conditional on the existence of moral reasons. So, for PAUMA to apply to a particular situation the person deciding how to act would have to *know* that *if* moral reasons exist, *then* *x* would be wrong.

The emphasis on *knowing* rather than merely *believing* is important. If knowledge entails truth, then knowing that some action is morally wrong entails that it is actually morally wrong. Similarly, knowing that an action *would* be wrong if moral reasons exist would entail that it is true that that action is wrong if moral reasons exist. I will not be discussing how or whether we have moral knowledge. I am going to assume that *conditional* moral knowledge is possible – i.e., we can have knowledge of what would be wrong *if* moral reasons were to exist. Just like I can know my roommate will be cranky if she has not eaten yet (without knowing or believing whether my roommate has eaten yet), I can know that certain actions would *definitely* be morally wrong if moral reasons exist (without knowing or believing that moral reasons exist). For example, I may be agnostic about or doubt whether moral reasons exist, but I can still know that *if* moral reasons exist then things like genocide and slavery are *definitely* morally wrong. I can be convinced by moral arguments, articles, testimonies, intuitions, etc. that some action would be wrong if moral reasons exist without being convinced that moral reasons exist. Referring to the above example, if someone is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons, they can still know that *if* moral reasons exist, *then* it would be wrong to eat meat. Notice, this condition does not commit anyone to the existence of moral reasons – it just says that *if* moral reasons exist, then certain first-order moral claims are known to be correct.

There may be a concern that Condition 2 makes it too difficult to know when PAUMA should be used. If knowledge (rather than mere belief) is required to apply PAUMA, and people are not always aware whether they have knowledge, then they will not know when they should apply the principle. In other words, people who do not recognize that Condition 2 applies to them will not be able to use PAUMA.[[9]](#footnote-9)

I want to acknowledge that this is a legitimate concern. There may be a lot of cases where an agent does not know whether they have conditional knowledge, and in those cases this principle would not be useful or helpful. However, there are some conditional moral beliefs that I think people would confidently accept as knowing. For example, the belief that, “*if* moral reasons exist, then slavery is wrong;” or, “*if* moral reasons exist, then genocide is wrong.” These kinds of beliefs, I think, would count as fairly clear instances where someone would recognize that PAUMA applies. It is not just that the agent strongly *believes* these conditional claims; the agent has to find it hard to conceive of the conditional claim being false. For these claims to be false it has to be the cases that moral reasons exist, yet genocide and slavery are not morally wrong. Intuitively, with these two examples I think it would be difficult for people to conceive of the conditional claims as being false, and thus not counting as knowledge. While this does not give a complete explanation for when the principle applies, I think highlighting some instances where the principle clearly applies helps point to the importance of further investigation of these kinds of beliefs to see why they are easier to recognize as knowledge of conditional moral claims.

I’ve also decided to make Condition 2 a knowledge claim as opposed to a claim about belief so as to avoid having the principle apply to situations where people have really radical or unintuitive moral beliefs. While I recognize that this will limit the scope of situations where PAUMA applies, I still think there are a sufficient number of situations structured like the example. Even if the number of these situations are limited, my main hope is that discussion of this principle and these situations will highlight some interesting features of practical rationality, moral reasons, and the relationship between the two (along with helping to begin some discussions about metaethical uncertainty). Regardless, while the scope of this principle may be narrow, I still think there are situations where the principle would be useful, and it at least starts some discussions about acting under metaethical uncertainty. So, conditional moral knowledge, as opposed to mere beliefs about morality, is required for PAUMA to be appropriately used.

If some act is conditionally *known* to be wrong, then, intuitively, the inverse action would have to be, *at least*, morally permissible. If not, then the person acting is doomed to do something morally wrong. These situations Thomas Nagel refers to as ‘moral blind alleys.’[[10]](#footnote-10) A moral blind alley is a situation where a person has to decide to either do *x* or not do *x* and both *x* and not-*x* are morally wrong. If someone got into this kind of situation because of their own doing (e.g., making two incompatible promises), then there is no choice the person can make that would not result in their doing something morally wrong. Even if the person has to make a decision between *x* and not-*x* not because of any choices they have made, Nagel claims that this may just violate our intuition that ‘ought’ implies ‘can.’ There is nothing incoherent, he claims, about the idea that moral blind alleys exist and a person has to make a choice between doing *x* or not-doing *x* (both of which are morally wrong).

I am going to assume that moral blind alleys do not exist. In other words, I am going to assume that the world is not structured in such a way that people have to decide between two morally wrong choices. If moral reasons exist, then one option has to be morally better than the other, and the morally better option will at least be permissible. I do not intend, or have the space, to make an argument for this claim here, but it seems intuitive that even in situations where someone has to decide between two seemingly wrong options one option is morally *better* than the other. It may be the case that the morally better option still turns out to be morally wrong. My assumption is that in these circumstances, what is usually a morally wrong decision is morally permissible because it is the best option available given the circumstances. For example, abortion may be wrong, but there are circumstances that make it a morally better choice than not getting an abortion. Likewise for something like killing innocent people – it may be wrong, but there are circumstances that make it a better option than an alternative. It’s being the best option available in a particular circumstance makes it a morally permissible choice. In situations where both options seem to be morally wrong, one of them has to be a better option than the other, and that option is then morally permissible. If neither option is better than the other, then both may be permissible simply because a decision has to be made.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To illustrate why knowing some act to be conditionally morally wrong implies that the inverse action is at least morally permissible, consider the example from earlier. If eating meat is known to be wrong (if moral reasons exist), then Minnie should believe that not eating meat at this particular time is at least morally permissible. Again, if both eating meat and not eating meat are morally wrong, then it seems like the agent deciding how to act is doomed to do something morally wrong. Intuitively, I think there has to be one option that is better than the other. Even if the morally correct option in a particular situation is something that is normally not morally permissible, it is still the correct option *given the circumstances*. In cases where eating meat is wrong, not eating meat has to be morally permissible since these are the only two options and they are mutually exclusive.

Regardless of these complications, in the situations that I am discussing only one of the two mutually exclusive options available is *known* to be conditionally morally wrong (per Condition 2). This means that the person does not have knowledge that the only other option available is also morally wrong. Given that the person has knowledge that one of the only two options available is morally wrong (if moral reasons exist), the person should act on the knowledge they have and avoid doing something they know to conditionally be morally wrong. If the person deciding how to act *knew* that both options were morally wrong (if moral reasons exist), then PAUMA would not apply to their situation because Condition 2 would not be satisfied. That person would not have the appropriate kind of knowledge of first-order moral claims. There also may be times or circumstances that the person deciding how to act believes, for example, getting an abortion or eating meat *would* be morally permissible (e.g., aborting a pregnancy that results from incest or eating meat at times when there is no other food source available). However, PAUMA does not apply in these situations because Condition 2 is not satisfied. Condition 2 would not be satisfied because the person would not have the requisite knowledge that *one* of the options is morally wrong in these hypothetical circumstances. Or, the person may have knowledge that in *these* circumstances not getting the abortion or not eating meat is morally wrong. If this is the case, then PAUMA could still apply – it would just produce different actions than the one I used in the example.

Both of these conditions are satisfied in the example. Granting the assumption that morally wrong things, if they exist, ought to be avoided, Minnie has a choice between eating meat (which she knows to be wrong – if moral reasons exist) and not eating meat (which is then, at least, morally permissible). Since the choice is between an option that is known to conditionally be morally wrong and another option that is then morally permissible, Minnie has a practical reason to avoid choosing the option she knows to be conditionally morally wrong (i.e., she has a practical reason to choose the option that is then morally permissible). She should choose this option because it gives her the best chance of making the correct moral decision even though she is agnostic about the existence of moral reasons.

*3.2 Distinguishing The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism from Similar Principles*

In order to highlight some of the benefits and limitations of this principle I will contrast it with similar principles that are advocated for in different circumstances. These principles include Pascal’s Wager and decision-making under theoretical uncertainty (which will be referred to as ‘Uncertaintism’).

Before contrasting PAUMA with Pascal’s Wager and Uncertaintism, I want to briefly mention a limitation of pursuing the project of searching for action-guiding principles while agnostic. It may seem like the project is not worth pursuing when considering it analogous to other kinds of agnosticism. For example, if moral knowledge is similar to mathematical knowledge (e.g., a priori knowable), then it would seem agnosticism about mathematical laws would encourage pursuing a similar principle of decision-making in math. I will not be arguing that moral knowledge is or is not similar to other kinds of knowledge (e.g., mathematical).[[12]](#footnote-12) However, if similar conditions apply regarding, for example, mathematical knowledge, then it may be useful to pursue similar decision-making principles. For example, it does not seem inconceivable to be uncertain or agnostic about whether mathematical objects (e.g., numbers) exist, and yet still believe that if these objects exist, then there are some propositions that are *definitely* true (i.e., knowable). In other words, it seems like you could have a similar conditional belief about mathematical knowledge. I can be agnostic about the exist of mathematical objects, yet know that *if* some certain mathematical objects exist, then there is some proposition (or set of propositions) that are true. If these conditions apply, then it seems like it may be useful to pursue some decision-making principles.

*3.2.1 Pascal’s Wager*

Like Pascal’s wager, PAUMA is a decision-making principle that is meant to give people the best possible chance of being correct. PAUMA is meant to give us the best possible chance of being correct by getting us to *act* in a particular way, whereas Pascal’s Wager is meant to give us the best possible chance of being correct by getting us to hold a particular *belief*.

Pascal’s Wager is an argument for believing that God exists.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Pascal argues, since God either does or does not exist, we should choose to believe that God exists because the worst-case scenario for believing that God exists is just as good as the best-case scenario for believing that God does not exist. In other words, God either exists or does not exist, and you can either choose to believe that God exists or choose to believe that God does not exist. If you believe that God exists, and God actually does exist, then you gain everything (e.g., infinite happiness). This is the best-case scenario. However, if you believe that God does not exist, and God actually does exist, then you lose everything. This is the worst-case scenario. In the case that God does not exist, then your belief in God will make no difference. So, the worst-case scenario for believing God exists is equivalent to the best-case scenario for not believing God exists. Given this situation, Pascal argues, we should wager that God exists.[[14]](#footnote-14)

 The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism can be structured in a similar manner. Just like Pascal’s Wager, the worst outcome for refraining from acting in a way that is conditionally known to be wrong is as equally good to the best-case scenario for acting in a way that is conditionally known to be wrong. The difference is that if moral reasons do not exist, then everything is permissible (instead of there being ‘no difference’).[[15]](#footnote-15) Still, given the assumption that wrong things (if they exist) ought to be avoided, then people should choose to avoid acting in a way that is conditionally known to be wrong because this gives them the best chance of avoiding doing something that *is* morally wrong.

Consider the example from earlier. In this example, as stipulated by Condition 2, eating meat is known to be morally wrong (if moral reasons exist). There may be situations where eating meat would not be wrong, but these would be situations where Condition 2 does not apply, and hence, PAUMA does not apply.

 This principle is similar to Pascal’s Wager in a few other respects. First, this argument will not work for people who believe that moral reasons do not exist. This is why it is important for the agent to be agnostic about the existence of moral reasons (Condition 1). Likewise, Pascal’s Wager will not work for people who do not think it is *possible* for God to exist. If someone assigns a zero percent chance to the existence of God or moral reasons, then these kinds of arguments will not be convincing. Second, just like God either does or does not exist, moral reasons either do or do not exist. Again, there may be people who do not think this is the case, but this argument is not addressed to them. Lastly, in Pascal’s Wager I may not know whether God exists, but I could still know that *if* God exists *then* I should believe in its existence. Likewise for PAUMA: I may not know whether moral reasons exist, but I could still know that *if* moral reasons exist *then* some act would be morally wrong.

*3.2.2 Uncertaintism*

Uncertaintism, a term used by Elizabeth Harman, refers to a principle of decision-making under theoretical uncertainty. To emphasis the structure of Uncertaintist arguments, the principle can be explained as follows:

In deciding whether to *x*, where an agent is uncertain of *x*’s moral status, and the only other way of acting - *y* (which necessarily entails not-*x*) - is known to be morally permissible, it would be *z* for an agent not to *y*.

In other words, if an agent has to either *x* or *y*, where the agent is uncertain of *x*’s moral status and *y* is known to be morally permissible, an agent should *y* because it would be *z* for the agent not to *y*.

Ted Lockhart (2000) proposes that *z* be replaced with ‘irrational.’ Thus, in situations where we have to decide between two actions, one of which might be wrong while the other is definitely not wrong, it would be irrational to do the action that *might* be wrong.[[16]](#footnote-16) Given that the other action is known to be, or is definitely, not wrong, there is no need to take a moral risk and act in a way that *may* be morally wrong. According to Lockhart, you would be taking an unnecessary moral risk and in cases of moral uncertainty we ought to maximize our chances of being morally right.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Guerrero (2007) and Moller (2011), although discussing different issues (eating animals and abortion, respectively), emphasize the moral wrongness of killing. In these arguments *z* would be replaced with ‘wrong.’ Given that people are uncertain of the moral status of killing in both of these situations, whereas the act of not getting an abortion and not eating meat is definitely morally permissible, an agent should avoid the action of which they are morally uncertain given how wrong it *could* be. Since both situations involve questionable acts of killing and killing is taken to be a grave moral wrong, the agent should choose to perform the act that is definitely morally permissible. This way the agent avoids doing something that is gravely morally wrong (e.g., in circumstances where there is nothing wrong with *not* getting an abortion and *not* eating meat).

Although these arguments differ in their details, justification, and applications, they are structurally similar. They all advocate choosing to act in a way that is known to be morally permissible as opposed to acting in a way of which the agent is morally uncertain. Even though they differ on what *z* represents, they each advocate choosing to *y* rather than *x*.

The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism is similarly structured to Uncertaintist arguments. There is an agent who has to make a decision of how to act between two mutually exclusive options. In both cases, for example, the decision is between either eating meat or not eating meat or getting an abortion or not getting an abortion. The difference between these two principles is that Uncertaintism requires that the agent knows that one of the actions is morally permissible, whereas PAUMA requires that an agent knows that one of the actions is morally wrong (if moral reasons exist).

*4. Some Familiar Objections*

 Now I will be addressing some objections that can be made to each of the principles. These objections, however, will be made to apply specifically to PAUMA. As such, I will not be offering responses to these objections as they apply to the original principles. I am also not addressing all the possible objections to these principles. My aim is to address these objections as a way of highlighting some of the strengths and limitations of PAUMA.

*4.1 An Objection to Pascal’s Wager*

 There is one objection to Pascal’s Wager that I will be applying to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism. The objection will be briefly explained as it applies to Pascal’s Wager, made to apply to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism, and finally a response will be offered.

It may be objected that people will actually lose something if they believe in God’s existence. In other words, Pascal is mistaken to think that there is no difference between believing God exists and not believing that God exists if it turns out that God does not exist. The person who chooses to believe that God exists when God does not actually exist may end up losing something after all.

For PAUMA, a similar objection would suggest that by avoiding acting in a way conditionally known to be wrong a person would do something permissible but at a cost. There are two ways of understanding this concern. First, these costs may make it such that what would be morally permissible actually turns out to be morally wrong; second, someone may be willing to do something morally wrong if the costs of doing something morally permissible are too high. In either case, if the costs are too high, then PAUMA will not be enough to convince someone to avoid acting in a way that is known to be conditionally morally wrong. For example, if someone believes eating meat is wrong if moral reasons exist, and they choose not to eat meat, they may be sacrificing such things as convenience, taste, financial costs, etc. Taking these kinds of factors into account may mean that not eating meat is not morally permissible. The money it costs to not eat meat could be better spent elsewhere, not eating meat could put a strain on important relationships, or the stress and inconvenience of not eating meat may be too much for a person to handle. While the person deciding how to act is still agnostic about the existence of moral reasons and still believes that moral reasons could exist, these costs could cause the moral status of eating meat and not eating meat to change.

These costs may be enough to convince a person that not-eating meat is not actually morally permissible because they would end up sacrificing too much. Or, the person may not be convinced that they ought to avoid doing something morally wrong. They may think that eating meat would generally be wrong, but the costs of not eating meat are too high to care about doing something morally wrong. Similarly with getting an abortion, someone may know that getting an abortion is wrong if moral reasons exist, but the costs of not-getting an abortion are enough to either make getting an abortion morally permissible or make them to not care about doing something morally wrong. In any case, the concern is that the sacrifices or costs are great enough that the moral status of the available options changes or the costs convince the person that they do not care about doing something that may be morally wrong. If this happens, then avoiding acting in a way known to generally be conditionally morally wrong actually ends up being the morally wrong way to act (if moral reasons exist).

This concern is part of the motivation for making Condition 2 a knowledge claim. If the person who is agnostic has knowledge that eating meat is conditionally morally wrong *in a particular situation*, then that would entail that eating meat is conditionally morally wrong in that situation. There may be other situations or circumstances where the person does not have knowledge that eating meat is wrong (e.g., the costs are too high). However, PAUMA is not meant to be a universal principle in the sense that it can be used to determine that a person should *never* act in a particular way. For example, the principle is not meant to suggest that it is never permissible to eat meat or get an abortion. Nor is it meant to be a principle that determines what actions are known to be conditionally morally wrong. The principle is meant to be used on a case-by-case basis to provide people with a practical reason to act in a particular way. If the person deciding how to act finds themselves in a situation where they do not know that eating meat would be wrong (i.e., Condition 2 is not satisfied), then this principle simply is not going to help them. In other words, this principle is not addressed to people who fail to satisfy Condition 2, and the costs associated with acting in a particular way may alter whether Condition 2 is satisfied, but those costs do not undermine the usefulness of the principle when Condition 2 *is* satisfied.

*4.2 Objections to Uncertaintism*

There are two objections to Uncertaintism that I will be applying to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism. Each objection will be briefly explained as it applies to Uncertaintist arguments, made to apply to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism, and finally a response will be offered.

First, there is a concern that Uncertaintism is an incoherent principle for acting. Brian Weatherson characterized acting from theoretical uncertainty by stating that if an agent believes in Uncertaintism,[[18]](#footnote-18) then, intuitively, there are “clearly implausible consequences.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Uncertaintism is explained as follows:

If an agent has a choice between two options, and one might be wrong, while the other is definitely permissible, then it is wrong to choose the first option.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Weatherson claims that, if an agent thinks Uncertaintism is true, yet is also *almost certain* that eating meat is permissible for her now, and she is sure that eating vegetables is permissible for her *now*, then she should *know* that eating meat for her right now is wrong (i.e., she should *know* it is wrong; she should not be *almost certain* it is wrong). Thus, Uncertaintism is incoherent.

As it applies to PAUMA, the objection would be that it is also similarly incoherent. If someone believes PAUMA is correct and knows that eating meat or getting an abortion would be wrong if moral reasons exist, and they then know that not eating meat and not getting an abortion would be permissible, then they should know it is morally wrong to eat meat or to get an abortion. They should know that eating meat and getting an abortion are morally wrong as opposed to just being conditionally morally wrong. If not eating meat and not getting an abortion are known to be morally permissible if moral reasons exist, and they are also permissible if moral reasons do not exist (because then anything would be permissible), then not eating meat and not getting an abortion are known to be morally permissible. If these are known to be morally permissible, then the alternative mutually exclusive options would have to be morally wrong.

This is why Condition 2 is stated as a knowledge claim about an action being morally *wrong* instead of a knowledge claim about an action being morally *permissible*. Just because something is morally permissible does not mean that the alternative action has to be morally wrong – both actions can be morally permissible. However, as was stated earlier, if an action is known to be morally wrong, then the only alternative mutually exclusive option has to be at least morally permissible (assuming moral blind alleys do not exist).

Second, the principle for acting in Uncertaintism seems more like a principle of prudential reasoning than a principle of morality. Weatherson argues Uncertaintism is unnecessary because the motivation to find a principle like Uncertaintism is mistaken. The motivation for Uncertaintism seems to be an intuition that cases of non-normative uncertainty are analogous to more explicitly moral cases (e.g., eating meat and abortions). As an example, say Jason is baking cookies and he has an unmarked bottle that contains either cyanide or vanilla. In this case, it seems Jason should not use the bottle of liquid in baking the cookies because he does not know the contents of the bottle and it could be cyanide. This is a case of non-normative uncertainty: Jason simply does not know the contents of the bottle. He knows it is either cyanide or vanilla extract, but he does not know which. Weatherson claims that supporters of Uncertaintism have been motivated by thinking that these kinds of cases are analogous to cases of normative uncertainty. This, he believes, is mistaken. He offers a few examples of similar situations that produce intuitions that are counter to Uncertaintist arguments. While I will not go over each of these cases here, the main idea is that what the agent would be sacrificing in cases of non-normative uncertainty is significantly different from what an agent would be sacrificing in cases of normative uncertainty. Were Jason to use the bottle he would be risking his life for little-to-no gain. Assuming life is something that usually ought to be preserved, it seems like Jason ought to forego using the bottle. However, in cases of normative uncertainty what is being risked is whatever turns out to be morally good without any clear idea of what ‘morally good’ may entail. This seems to fetishize morality, Weatherson claims, and is thus wrong (assuming doing *anything* that would be morally good merely *because* it is morally good is wrong).[[21]](#footnote-21) The person who believes in Uncertaintism is concerned with doing whatever turns out to be morally right when they should be concerned with doing what is actually morally right.

For PAUMA the objection would be that the principle seems to be a principle of prudential reasoning rather than a principle of morality. Given the contexts in which the principle should be used, someone using PAUMA is only concerned with doing *whatever* is morally right (whatever that action may be) – they are not concerned with doing any particular action *because* it is actually morally right. The principle then only seems to help in cases of non-normative uncertainty. Someone who is supposed to use PAUMA is not uncertain about anything normative; they are uncertain about something descriptive. Namely, they are uncertain whether moral reasons *exist*. It’s not stated that they are uncertain about what the existence of moral reasons would require them to do. As such, PAUMA seems more like a principle of prudential reasoning than a principle of morality.

It is not clear that this is a problem for PAUMA. Since PAUMA gives a practical reason – instead of a moral reason - to act in a particular way, then Weatherson’s objection does not seem to apply. The motivation behind PAUMA is not to find a moral (or meta-moral) principle for acting – it is to give people under certain conditions the best chance of acting in a morally correct way (if moral reasons exist). As such, it is not claimed to be a moral principle. PAUMA being more like a principle of prudential reasoning, I believe, actually counts in its favor. Given that the person deciding how to act is metaethically agnostic, a moral principle would not apply to them because they are agnostic about the existence of moral reasons (thus, agnostic about the existence of moral principles). However, so long as the person cares about being rational or doing what is practically rational, then PAUMA can apply to them. Similarly, this does seem to be a case of non-normative uncertainty because the agent is uncertain about *how they ought to act* given their agnosticism about the existence of moral reasons. Moral reasons would seem to be normative by definition. Being uncertain about their existence is being uncertain about something normative. The main question, however, is not how to determine whether moral reasons exist – it is to determine how one ought to act given their agnosticism about the existence of moral reasons. So Weatherson’s objection doesn’t seem to be a problem when directed at PAUMA.

*6. Concluding Remarks*

 One of the aims of this paper was to start the discussions about acting under metaethical uncertain. To do that, I argued for the use of The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism under two specific conditions: (1) the agent has to be agnostic about the existence of moral reasons, and (2) they have to have knowledge of certain conditional moral claims. While there are limitations concerning the application of this principle, or although the conditions where the principle applies may be narrow in scope, there do seem to be situations in which the principle would apply. My hope is that the argument here has also highlighted some of ways in which first-order and second-order moral beliefs can be related. Although I have only discussed metaethical uncertainty in the form of metaethical agnosticism, I hope that this paper will help to inspire further discussions of metaethical uncertain more generally.

**References**

Clarke-Doane, J. (2014). Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy. *Noûs* 48, 238-255.

FitzPatrick, W. (2008). Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New Skeptical Challenge. *Ethics* 118, 589-613.

Guerrero, A. (2007). Don’t Know, Don’t Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability and Caution. *Philosophical Studies* 136, 59-97.

Harman, E. (*forthcoming*). The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*.

--. (2011). Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate? *Ratio* 24, 443-468.

Lockhart, T. (2000). *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McClennen, E. (1994). Pascal’s Wager and Finite Decision Theory. In *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal’s Wager*. Jeff Jordan (ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Moller, D. (2011). Abortion and Moral Risk. *Philosophy* 86, 425-443.

Nagel, T. (1972). War and Massacre. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (2), 123-144.

Oddie, G. (1995). Moral Uncertainty and Human Embryo Experimentation. In *Medicine and Moral Reasoning*. K.W.M. Fulford, G. Gillett, and J.M. Soskice (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pascal, B. (1670). *Pensées*. Translated by W.F. Trotter, London: Dent, 1910.

Rosen, G. (2003). Culpability and Ignorance. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 61-84.

--. (2004). Skepticism about Moral Responsibility. *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, 295-313.

Ross, J. (2006). Rejecting Ethical Deflationism. *Ethics* 116, 742-768.

Schroeder, M. (2017). Normative Ethics and Metaethics. In *The Routledge Handbook to Metaethics*. T. McPherson and D. Plunkett (eds.). New York: Routledge.

Sepielli, A. (2007). What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics 4*, 5-28.

--. (2013a). Moral Uncertainty and the Principle of Equity among Moral Theories. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (3), 580-589.

--.(2013b). What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do. *Nous* 47 (1), 521-544.

Smith, M. (1994) *The Moral Problem*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Sturgeon, N. (1986) What Difference Does It Make Whether Moral Realism is True? *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, 115-141.

Weatherson, B. (2014). Running Risks Morally. *Philosophical Studies* 167 (1), 141-163.

Williams, N. (2008). Affected Ignorance and Animal Suffering: Why Our Failure to Debate Factory Farming Puts Us at Moral Risk. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 21, 371-384.

1. The wording of this distinction comes from Andrew Sepielli’s (2007) “What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf., Guerrero (2007), Moller (2011), Oddie (1995), and Williams (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf., Lockhart (2000), Ross (2006), and Sepielli (2007, especially 2013a). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One might ask how we could have applicatory knowledge despite being theoretically and/or metaethically uncertain. I don’t intend to articulate or defend any kind of hierarchical ranking or ordering of the different levels at which normative uncertainty can occur. It will be enough for my purposes if I can show that it’s plausible to have knowledge at the applicatory level while at the same time being metaethically agnostic. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As is stated later, I will not be addressing questions of responsibility. For arguments concerning questions of responsibility when acting despite moral uncertainty see: FitzPatrick (2008), Harman (2011), Rosen (2003, 2004), Williams (2008), and Zimmerman (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I’m using this particular example because it is one of the two most popular examples in the literature on decision-making under theoretical uncertainty. The same things can be shown if the example involved getting an abortion instead of eating meat. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an argument against this idea, see, Mark Schroeder’s (2017) “Normative Ethics and Metaethics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nagel (1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There are situations, for example, where deciding whether to get an abortion or whether to eat meat is purely the result of a person’s decisions, and what the person did to get themselves into that situation may have been morally wrong. However, this does not seem to entail that both options in the current decision are morally wrong. There are two different decision-making contexts: (1) the one that got the person into a situation where they have to make their current decision, and (2) their current decision. Even though the person may have made a morally wrong choice that put them in the current decision-making context, the moral status of the available choices may change given the circumstances. The person could have done something morally wrong to get themselves into a situation where they have to decide whether to get an abortion or whether to eat meat, but this is a different decision than the one that got them into this situation in the first place. I am assuming that while the two decisions are connected or related, the moral status of the available options in this new decision can change given the circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a comparison of moral knowledge and mathematical knowledge, see Clarke-Doane’s (2014), “Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pascal (1670/1910), §233. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I am not claiming this to be the correct interpretation of Pascal’s Wager. This is just one particular interpretation of Pascal’s Wager that is structurally similar to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism. This interpretation views Pascal’s Wager as a decision under uncertainty and can be found in McClennen (1994). Again, even if this isn’t the correct way of understanding Pascal’s Wager it’s a similar decision procedure to The Principle for Acting Under Metaethical Agnosticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Again, for an argument against this idea, see, Mark Schroeder’s (2017) “Normative Ethics and Metaethics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. When I have been saying that someone is unsure of an actions moral status, Lockhart refers to this as ‘might be morally wrong,’ and what I have been referring to as ‘morally permissible’ Lockhart refers to as ‘not morally wrong.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sepielli (2007) offers a similar argument that advocates maximizing expected moral value. Acting in ways that are known to be morally permissible maximizes expected moral value since the only other way of acting is believed to possibly be morally wrong. Thus, acting in a way that could be morally wrong, when an alternative that is known to be morally permissible is available, fails to maximize *expected* moral value. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Weatherson refers to this principle as “ProbWrong.” ProbWrong and Uncertaintism are roughly equivalent (there are different variations of ProbWrong - see §4.2.2 - but the general idea is the same). As such, in this paper I will refer to ProbWrong as Uncertaintism. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Weatherson (2014), p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Weatherson acknowledges that his argument owes a lot to Smith’s (1994) distinction between doing what is actually morally right and doing whatever turns out to be morally right (p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)