

MORAL DISAGREEMENT AND MORAL SKEPTICISM

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1. Moral disagreement does not entail an implausible moral skepticism

Many have, for many reasons, worried that moral disagreement entails moral skepticism. Herein, I respond to one such worry. It emerges from recent work in epistemology, on so-called *Conciliatory* views of disagreement.¹ According to Conciliatory views, the correct response to peer disagreement is agnosticism. Since peer disagreement seems to pervade our moral discourse, we are left, it seems, with mass agnosticism, or moral skepticism.²

This argument is sometimes intended to establish just this: moral skepticism.³ Other times, it is meant as a *reductio* of this otherwise plausible view of disagreement.⁴ The thought is this. Conciliationism entails moral skepticism, but such skepticism is absurd. So, we should reject Conciliationism.

My aim is to show that for any given class of apparent moral disagreements, either agnosticism isn't required, or, if it is, it isn't absurd that it is required. So whatever moral skepticism we are left with is both contained and independently warranted.

This is because Conciliationism does not require agnosticism in response to disagreements about the most basic moral beliefs, such as that pain is bad, that we should take care of our children, etc. This is in part because such disagreements are rare—so rare that the amount of *agreement* about such matters is the basis of a different skeptical argument.⁵ It is also because such disagreements are not peer disagreements. The full defense of this claim is subtle and complicated, but the short answer is easy: we have no grounds upon which to judge that people with whom we so deeply disagree are our peers. This is not to say that such fundamental disagreements shouldn't worry us, or that we couldn't find an alternative route to skepticism from these disagreements. It's just that if we think they should worry us, we are invoking something other than the Conciliatory reasoning under attack. Conciliationism doesn't require us to suspend judgment about such matters.

Conciliationism may require agnosticism about more difficult moral matters, such as what constitutes a good life and what is the correct theory of right

action, as well as less theoretical and perhaps more urgent matters, such as whether torture or the death penalty are ever justified. It is independently plausible, however, that our epistemic situation is poor with respect to such matters. Perhaps for some of these, we have poor evidence; perhaps others are exactly the sorts of matters that trigger personal or political biases, thereby increasing our chances of error. Disagreement flourishes under such conditions.⁶ Insofar as Conciliationism requires agnosticism in response to such disagreements, then, it is doing exactly what it should be—it is tracking the fact of our bad epistemic situation and requiring us to adjust accordingly. Conciliationism thus does entail some agnosticism, but it is a reasonable amount.

Here is the plan. I will begin with a brief sketch of the relevant argument from disagreement to moral skepticism. I will distinguish the argument from some other familiar ones by explaining exactly what sort of skepticism is supposed to follow. I will then explain and motivate Conciliationism. I won't aim to provide a substantive defense of the view, but rather, simply to establish that it is independently attractive and worth taking seriously. I will then assume that Conciliationism is true, since my goal is to show that it has the resources to respond to this worry. Armed with a better understanding of Conciliationism, I will revisit the initial argument and show how the view appears to entail an unacceptable moral skepticism. I will then show that this appearance is misleading.

What I accomplish here is clearly relevant to Conciliationists. It is, after all, a defense of their view. It should also be of interest to Non-Conciliationists, however. Many reject Conciliationism because of its supposed skeptical implications. This is a direct response to them. But the rest of you should care too—at least, insofar as you care about the epistemic status of your moral beliefs. This particular argument from disagreement to skepticism arises out of the recognition that we are fallible creatures, prone to making all sorts of mistakes. We should therefore be open to evidence of our own error, and we should aim to rationally accommodate such evidence when we get it. The testimony of those we respect is often just such evidence. Conciliationism aims to capture this sensible thought. I think it succeeds. We should want to know, then, what sort of skepticism, if any, such sensible epistemic humility might entail.

2. The argument from disagreement to skepticism

The relevant argument from moral disagreement to moral skepticism is a recent one—or at least, it has recently received attention. It emerges from the *prima facie* plausible view that learning that someone whose opinion you respect disagrees with you may require you to become less confident in your opinion—perhaps to the point of agnosticism.⁷ Kieran Setiya argues that this “tempting” account of the epistemology of disagreement is “the basis of a devastating skepticism.”⁸ This is because, as he puts it, “in ethics, disagreement with peers is more or less routine.”⁹ Explicitly, then, this is the challenge.

1. The correct response to peer disagreement is agnosticism.
2. There is a lot of peer disagreement about morality.
3. Therefore, we should be agnostic about a lot of morality.

Since this argument is valid, there are just two ways to avoid the skeptical conclusion: we must either reject this view of disagreement or the claim that disagreement abounds. I will accept (1) and attack (2), in that order.

But first, I want to clarify the nature of this skeptical worry, and to distinguish it from some familiar but only superficially similar ones.

2.1. This is not an argument for relativism or nihilism

Moral skepticism is the epistemological thesis that we lack moral knowledge. It is thus compatible with the existence of objective moral facts. This is important for distinguishing this worry from the sort raised by relativists or nihilists. J. L. Mackie, for example, aims to show that the best explanation for the existence of so much intractable moral disagreement is that there are no moral facts.¹⁰ We cannot have moral knowledge, according to Mackie, because there is nothing to know. Mackie's conclusion is thus metaphysical and metaethical, whereas ours is purely epistemological.¹¹ Our skeptic sees disagreement and concludes that we cannot remain confident in our beliefs, not because there are no facts or truths to which they correspond, but because we have good reason to think we are mistaken about whatever facts or truths there may be.

2.2. This is not the problem of answering the moral skeptic

This challenge from disagreement to skepticism should be distinguished from the challenge of answering the moral skeptic, or of determining what to say to ideally coherent moral monsters, like Caligula.

First, such disagreements aren't actual disagreements. Conciliationists think disagreement is undermining because it provides evidence of error. It should be significant, then, that no one actually disagrees with us in this way.¹²

Second, though Conciliationism's opponents sometimes assume that such ideally coherent characters are our peers, we should resist this. Consider, for example, Setiya's stranger case, which is meant to demonstrate the problem with Conciliationism:

... you meet a stranger. He agrees with you outside of ethics, but when it comes to practical reason, his beliefs are shocking. Fill in the details as you like. Perhaps he thinks that we should act on our final desires, whatever they are, that we should be utterly selfish, that we should maximize aggregate happiness, no matter who is trampled on the way. [...] If the stranger is your epistemic peer, and

[Conciliationism] holds, you should lose faith in your ethical beliefs: you should become agnostic about the matters on which you disagree. But that is not the right response! We should not defer to moral monsters but condemn them . . .¹³

I agree with Setiya that we should not defer to moral monsters. I only add that we have no reason to think that such monsters are our peers. So Conciliationism doesn't require that we defer to them. I will have to say more to establish this later. For now it is enough to note that it's far from clear that we should take people with whom we disagree so fundamentally to be our peers.

In another context, Sharon Street compares "ideally coherent eccentrics" like Caligula to an alien species, about which we know nothing.¹⁴ Perhaps they disagree with us about whether it is morally permissible for them to kill us and repopulate our earth with their own kind. Should we care? Well, yes, of course, they aim to kill us! But should we care *epistemically*? Should their opinions shake our confidence? In the service of a different intuition pump, Street writes that really understanding what sort of creatures these would be—just how different from us they would be morally and epistemically—may well short-circuit our intuitions.¹⁵ I suspect the same is true here, and it's all I need to establish at the moment: that, at least, it isn't clear that we should take such creatures to be our peers.¹⁶

2.3. This is a contingent skepticism

It is important to note that Conciliationism doesn't imply moral skepticism no matter what. It only implies agnosticism about *p* when there is the right kind of disagreement about *p*. This is important, first, for distinguishing our challenge from yet another, and second, for somewhat disarming it.

On the first point. This skeptical problem is not an *a priori* skeptical argument according to which we lack moral knowledge however the world may be. Hence the upshot of the previous section: we are not trying to answer the moral skeptic. In order for our skeptical argument to work, the world must cooperate by containing enough of the right kind of disagreement. This point is especially important for thinking about the sort of epistemic principle Conciliationists should employ: it had better not be one that licenses an *a priori* skeptical argument. It should be one that picks out all and only the cases of disagreement that provide us with evidence of our own error.

On the second point. This contingent skepticism isn't as clearly problematic as other forms of skepticism. Consider an analogy.

1. If you don't have any evidence pertaining to *p*, you should be agnostic about *p*.
2. We don't have any evidence pertaining to how the universe began.
3. Therefore, we should be agnostic about how the universe began.

If this argument is sound, we have to suspend belief about the origins of the universe—but so what? This is an inevitable consequence of our unfortunate epistemic situation. It shouldn't lead us to reject the independently plausible principle on which the argument rests. On the contrary, we should want to be agnostic about that for which we have no relevant evidence.

According to Conciliationism, evidence of peer disagreement is evidence of error. If this is right, then it isn't absurd that we should be agnostic in response to peer disagreement.¹⁷ If there is a lot of peer disagreement, then, we really are in an unfortunate epistemic situation, and mass agnosticism follows. But this shouldn't lead us to reject the independently plausible Conciliationists principle on which the skeptical argument rests, namely, the premise that the right response to peer disagreement is agnosticism.

This is good to get out of the way immediately, and goes some way toward answering the charge that Conciliationism, in conjunction with disagreement, entails an unacceptable moral skepticism. If moral skepticism follows from *this* kind of moral disagreement—the kind that signifies error—then maybe that isn't so bad.

3. Conciliationism

Conciliationism states that evidence of disagreement can be undermining. Discovering that we disagree about whether the death penalty is ever justified, may require us to become less confident in, or to altogether abandon, our opinions on the issue.

Whether we are required to reduce confidence depends on whether we have good reason to think that our disagreement is evidence of error. Whether we have good reason to think that our disagreement is evidence of error in turn depends on our evaluation of each other's epistemic credentials.

This is a bit abstract. The best way to see what this view entails is to consider the sorts of cases standardly used to motivate it. These are simple cases of non-moral disagreement between people who are epistemic peers.

Restaurant. We are out to dinner at our usual place. We finish our meals, the check comes, and we decide to split the bill. We have done this many times in the past. Mostly, we have agreed. When we have disagreed, each of us has been right an equal number of times. I look at the bill, mentally divide it in half, calculate the agreed upon tip, and put my portion on the table; you do the same. We compare amounts and it turns out that we disagree: you put down \$43, I put down \$49.

Question: Given our comparable track records on such calculations in such circumstances, how should my awareness of our disagreement affect my belief about how much we each owe?

Suggestion: It should make me become less confident in my belief.

This is not a controversial verdict. Nor is this the sort of case that parties in the debate disagree about.¹⁸ They disagree, instead, about what explains this verdict—about the right overall theory. Nearly everyone accepts, however, that whatever that theory may be, it should rule thus in such cases.

Nearly everyone also agrees about the following case of perceptual disagreement.

Stoplight. You and I are traffic cops watching the cars pass on Main Street. We are equally good, equally attentive cops, with equally reliable eyesight. We see a truck pass through the intersection. I think that it ran the red light. You think it got through on yellow.¹⁹

Question: Given our comparable track records at spotting speeders, how should my awareness of our disagreement affect my belief about whether the truck ran the red light?

Suggestion: It should make me become less confident.

This verdict is also uncontroversial. The controversy, again, is about what explains it.

3.1. Epistemic credentials

For the Conciliationist, part of the explanation of what we should do when we disagree has to do with our evaluation of each other's epistemic credentials. It is a stipulation of these cases that we take each other to be equally likely to be right. If we do, then we should take each other to be *epistemic peers*.

Following Adam Elga, we should understand epistemic peerhood thus:

...you count your friend as an epistemic peer with respect to an about-to-be-judged claim if and only if you think that, conditional on the two of you disagreeing about the claim, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken.²⁰

Notice that my reason for thinking that we are equally likely to be mistaken—the evidence that I have for thinking that you are my peer—can be weaker or stronger. It depends on a number of factors, including how much I know about our respective credentials, track records, reliability, etc. Both Restaurant and Stoplight are set up so that it is clear we should take each other to be peers: in both cases we have long track records of agreement, equal reliability, etc.

These helpful simplifications are admittedly unrealistic—as are toy cases like the above.²¹ We are rarely, if ever, in such a good position to judge that someone is our peer. But this observation causes no trouble for Conciliationism. In fact, it helps us refine and better understand it.

This is because just how much I ought to decrease my confidence when I learn that we disagree will depend, in part, on whether I take you to be my epistemic peer—it will depend on both how close to peers I take us to be and on how confident I am in this judgment.

On the first point. How I ought to respond to a given disagreement will depend, in part, on my evaluation of the epistemic credentials of those with whom I disagree. If I take them to be my peers or superiors, I think that they are at least as likely as I am to be right. In that sort of case, Conciliationism says I must become less confident. (If I take them to be my epistemic inferiors, then I may remain confident, perhaps as confident, as I was before I learned that we disagreed.)

On the second point. How I should respond to a given disagreement also depends on how rationally confident I am in my judgment about your epistemic credentials. Am I certain that I should take you to be my peer? Or do I only have a little bit of evidence for this? It matters how good of a reason I have for thinking that we are equally likely to get things right.²²

We can now see that a number of factors have to be in place for Conciliationism and disagreement to entail agnosticism. It isn't enough that you are as likely as I am to get things right. I have to have reason to think that we are equally likely to be right—I have to have reason to treat you as my peer. That reason, furthermore, has to be a good reason if it is to do any substantive undermining. It isn't enough that I sort of, kind of, think that maybe I should treat you as my peer. If that's my situation, maybe I should become a bit less confident, but I certainly shouldn't abandon my belief altogether.²³ If, on the other hand, I have a lot of evidence that I should take you to be my peer, and I am highly confident that we are equally likely to be right, then learning that we disagree should have a much greater effect on my level of confidence.²⁴

Already we can see how the requirement that you take me to be your epistemic peer, when properly understood, limits the number of disagreements that require agnosticism. There may be very many people who disagree with you about moral matters. There are fewer who disagree with you about moral matters among those you take to be your peers. There are even fewer among those you *confidently* take to be your peers.

Conciliationism is thus a more timid view than its opponents sometimes suppose. It doesn't dole out agnosticism rashly. There are built in constraints, which minimize the number of cases in which we must reduce confidence. The requirement that I have good reason to take you to be my peer is one such constraint. *Independence* is another.

3.2. Independence

This much everyone can agree on: your evaluation of others' epistemic credentials matters to how you should respond to disagreement. What distinguishes

Conciliationism from other views of disagreement is a further principle about the proper way to evaluate epistemic credentials.

Independence. In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief that *p*, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about *p*, I shouldn't rely on my initial belief that *p*, nor on the reasoning behind that belief.²⁵

On the face of it, Independence looks like it will cause even more trouble for Conciliationism. I advertised it as a constraint that can help narrow down the number of cases in which we are required to reduce confidence. What Independence says, however, is that I cannot dismiss our disagreement using any of the reasons, arguments, or evidence that led me to my initial belief. By restricting what considerations I may call upon in evaluating your epistemic credentials, Independence substantially limits my resources, thereby making it harder to dismiss dissenting opinions. Independence thus looks as if it will, contrary to my promise, increase the number of cases for which agnosticism is required.

So why should we accept Independence? Because it is a plausible, well-motivated principle. Here's Christensen:

[Independence is] intended to prevent blatantly question-begging dismissals of the evidence provided by the disagreement of others. It attempts to capture what would be wrong with a P-believer saying, e.g., "Well, so-and-so disagrees with me about P. But since P is true, she's wrong about P. So however reliable she may generally be, I needn't take her disagreement about P as any reason at all to question my belief." There is clearly something worrisome about this sort of response to the disagreement of others. Used as a general tactic, it would seem to allow a non-expert to dismiss even the disagreement of large numbers of those he took to be experts in the field.²⁶

Christensen argues that we should accept Independence in order to avoid legitimizing a certain kind of badly question-begging move. Conciliationism delivers intuitively attractive results in cases of peer disagreement like the above—but it cannot do so without Independence. This is because Independence blocks me from saying, for example, in the Restaurant case, "I know we're both equally likely to have correctly calculated our portions. But I got \$43, and that's the right answer! So you must have made a mistake this time."

Grant Independence, then, for the sake of argument. You might have other worries about it, but keep in mind our dialectic: the aim is not to defend Conciliationism as worry-proof or problem-free.²⁷ It is, rather, to show that it doesn't succumb to one particular worry, which grants the truth of some Independence-like requirement and tries to draw a *reductio*.

Here's how we can block that *reductio*, if we understand Independence the right way. Independence limits what resources I have for dismissing dissenting opinion, but it also—at the same time—limits my ability to get good evidence of epistemic peerhood.

Recall that how I must respond to evidence of disagreement depends on not only whether I think we are equally likely to be right, but also how confident I am in that judgment. If I have very weak evidence pertaining to your epistemic credentials, I won't be able to come to a rationally confident judgment about those credentials. The more evidence I have, the more confident I can become that we are or aren't equally likely to be right.

For example, suppose I am trying to determine if I should take you to be my peer with respect to whether the leak coming from my office ceiling is the result of an ice jam. I think it is, say, but you think it isn't.

Now suppose I am not fortunate to be in one of those cases in which I have tons of evidence of your epistemic credentials. In fact, suppose, to start, that all I know about you is that you are human and that we disagree.

That is *some* information to go on. It suggests, at the very least, that you know what an ice jam is, and that you have some opinion about whether it could cause leaks in general, and this leak in particular. If all I knew was that you were a human, and I did not know whether we disagreed, I'd have no reason to think you even know what an ice jam is, much less that you're likely to reliably diagnose the relevant sort of leak.

Still, that you are human and that we disagree isn't much to go on. I know far more about myself—I know that I have lived in old Massachusetts houses and experienced ice jam caused leaks, for example. For all I know, you could be a Californian who has never seen snow before. Of course, you could also be a Wisconsinite—and therefore have even more experience than I do with snow. Importantly, however, I have no reason to think this is the case. So I have no reason to think you are better, or even as well, positioned as I am on this matter.

To be clear—the upshot here is not that I can walk away thinking I am *better* positioned than you are on this matter. I am unable to make any judgment about our comparative reliabilities. In the absence of this, I have no idea how to take your opinion into account. In such cases, Conciliationism remains silent.

Independence thus constrains what I can draw on for the purposes of evaluating your epistemic credentials. It constrains my ability to judge that I should take you to be my peer because it limits the information I can use to make that judgment.

Suppose now that we disagree not about ice jams, but about whether the world will end tomorrow. To fairly evaluate your epistemic credentials on this matter, I have to set aside my own belief that the world will not end tomorrow, and all the reasons and evidence I have for that belief, and ask myself: are we equally likely to be right about whether the world will end tomorrow?

Such a disagreement is likely to go quite deep. The deeper it goes, the more I will have to set aside before I can evaluate your epistemic credentials.

Consider two versions of this case. In one, you believe the world will end tomorrow because Madame LaClairvoyante said so, upon reading your tea leaves and tapping her crystal ball three times with a toad's foot. We disagree, here,

not just about whether the world will end tomorrow, but about what would be good evidence for that claim. But if that is also under dispute, then I have to set it aside as well. Our respective beliefs about what counts as evidence for the claim that the world will end tomorrow presumably follow from some more general principles about what is good evidence for what, and, perhaps, whether a scientific or mystical picture of the world is correct. That too, then, is something we must set aside.

Alternatively, we might disagree about whether the world will end tomorrow because you are a counter-inductivist. This disagreement goes even deeper. After all, a 'mystical' worldview doesn't commit one to denying induction.

What am I left with, in these cases, that I can use to evaluate your epistemic credentials? I suspect the answer for both is somewhere between 'nothing' and 'not much'. I'll have more to go on if our disagreement bottoms out at the predictive power of tapping toad's feet, and less if it bottoms out at the status of induction. Thus, in these cases I can have at best very weak reason to take you to be my peer. Depending on the details, this reason may be so weak that it is negligible.

The point is clearer from a third-person perspective. Suppose that all you know about two people is that they are human beings with radically different worldviews. You don't even know what those worldviews are. How confident should you be that they are equally likely to be right about anything—be it ice jams or the apocalypse? The answer is: not at all.

By requiring you to set aside the matters under dispute, Independence puts you in something like this third-person perspective. The motivation for this setting aside was, recall, to protect your opponents—to keep you from dismissing them in a question-begging way. We can see now, however, the benefit of this restriction. It protects you from having to accommodate the opinions of conspiracy theorists and other, even ideally coherent, crazies.²⁸

4. The problem revisited

That's the view, and the rough mechanics of it. We can now see more carefully why skepticism is supposed to follow from Conciliationism and peer disagreement. When we discover that someone disagrees with us about p , we have to set aside our belief that p and our first-order evidence for p , and then evaluate whether this is someone whose opinion should move us. So, when I find out that someone disagrees with me about the permissibility of abortion, I have to set aside my view that abortion is permissible and all the reasons I have for thinking that abortion is permissible, and *then* decide if their contrary opinion matters. Once I have set all this aside, I can proceed to evaluate their epistemic credentials, and compare them to my own, in order to determine if I should take them to be my peer or superior.

But once I have set all this aside, if I determine that I should take you to be my peer, then I must suspend belief. Worse yet: I have nothing left with which to defend my belief. All the reasons I had for it are now out of bounds—they have been set aside. This means that even if I am right about the permissibility of abortion, and even if my first-order evidence somehow *entailed* my conclusion that abortion is permissible, I may still have to massively reduce confidence in my belief, perhaps to the point of agnosticism, just because we happen to disagree.²⁹

Some find this absurd on its own grounds—how could it be rational for me to give up my belief in this way if I was rational in holding it, before I found out that we disagreed? Perhaps this result is counterintuitive, but there is nothing perplexing about the mechanics of it. At least, there is nothing *more* perplexing about the mechanics of this than there is about the mechanics of defeat more generally. I might have good evidence, as good as one could hope for, to believe that the wall in front of me is painted red. If I then get strong, but unbeknownst to me misleading, evidence that there is tricky lighting in the room, I can no longer remain confident that the wall is painted red. Most of us happily accept defeating evidence like this into our epistemology. We can understand Conciliationism as the claim that disagreement sometimes constitutes defeating evidence.³⁰

If we still find ourselves reluctant to accept this verdict, we should remind ourselves of the alternative. In this case, the best argument for this position is the absurdity of the opposition. If we do not require this setting aside of our beliefs and evidence—if we do not require Independence, that is—we grant legitimacy to a particularly bad sort of question-begging move: “I did think you were as likely as I am to be right about this, but now that I know you disagree with me, I think you must be more likely to be mistaken.”

Accept this verdict, then, and notice: if it’s right for this moral disagreement, it’ll be right for others like it. And there is so much moral disagreement among peers. Isn’t there? That is our next question. But first, let’s sum up.

This was our skeptic’s argument:

1. The correct response to peer disagreement is agnosticism.
2. There is a lot of peer disagreement about morality.
3. Therefore, we should be agnostic about morality.

I have defended (1) by motivating and explaining Conciliationism. I have argued that it is an independently attractive view that gives the correct verdict for many simple cases of peer disagreement. I have also hinted at how the view might handle more complicated cases.

I will now shift focus to (2). I will argue that the prevalence of peer disagreement is overstated. Some apparent peer disagreements about morality, aren’t really disagreements about morality. Others aren’t really disagreements among peers.

5. Is there really so much peer disagreement about morality?

I don't want to be pulled astray here, into empirical matters I haven't investigated. The prevalence of peer disagreement cannot be determined *a priori*. At some point, we have to go out in the world and count those peers. We can, however, make some progress by thinking about what constitutes a distinctly moral peer disagreement. The hope is that we end up with a framework for thinking about disagreement, which we can use to determine how seriously we should take a given dissenting opinion.

To narrow down the number of cases that cause trouble for Conciliationism, we might start by showing that moral disagreement is less prevalent than it seems.³¹ If this is right, then perhaps peer disagreements about moral matters are also less prevalent, since they are a subset of the overall disagreements. How is this supposed to help, however? Isn't it enough that there be just some, even only a few, peer disagreements?

That's right. According to Conciliationism, disagreement with just one peer may warrant agnosticism. But the numbers matter. It matters whether your peers disagree with you, but it also matters what proportion of your peers disagree with you. For controversial issues, it is likely that for every peer I find who disagrees with me, there is some other peer who agrees with me. Perhaps there are one hundred of us: half believe that *p* and half believe that not-*p*. If that is all that we know about the distribution of belief on this issue, we should be pushed toward agnosticism, as Conciliationism counsels. If instead we survey our peers and discover that 70 agree with us that *p* while only 30 disagree, a higher level of confidence may be rational. In that case, the fact that there are two or three or even 30 peers that disagree with me should not push me to agnosticism—though it may rightly push me to become less confident in *p*.³²

Recognizing that the numbers count in this way helps diminish the threat of peer disagreement. Finding just one peer who disagrees with you may be enough to warrant a change of attitude. How much you have to change your attitude—whether you have to abandon it altogether—depends on what else you know about the distribution of opinion. The numbers count, then. But we can do more to show that they are lower than you might think. Here is why I find it plausible that there is less peer disagreement about morality than it might seem.

5.1. Not really *moral* disagreements

First, many apparent moral disagreements aren't really disagreements about moral matters. For example, we might disagree about whether the death penalty is justified because we disagree about whether it has deterrent effects. But whether the death penalty has deterrent effects is an empirical matter. Our disagreement, then, isn't a moral disagreement.

Thus, we might agree about what justifies punishments, while still disagreeing about whether this particular punishment is just. Likewise, we might agree on what morality requires of us in general, but disagree whether it requires that we be honest, benevolent, etc., in particular cases.

The requirement that we be agnostic in the face of such disagreements does not come from our inability to determine what morality requires—we can agree to that. Our disagreement arises, rather, because we cannot figure out what the world is like.

If many of our moral disagreements can be explained in this way, as fundamentally non-moral, then we are only stuck with a very limited moral skepticism. We can, after all, remain confident in what morality requires. We cannot remain confident in our judgments about some cases with complicated or murky empirical details, but that's unproblematic. We are not left, here, with an unacceptable moral skepticism.

5.2. Not really *peer* disagreements

Conciliationism says that the right response to disagreement depends on your evaluation of the epistemic credentials of those with whom you disagree. Before performing that evaluation you have to set aside your belief about the disputed matter, as well as the reasons or evidence on which you ground your belief. If, after doing that, you find that you have good reason to take this person to be your epistemic peer, you may well have to become agnostic about the disputed matter.

What this means is that there is a limit to how much peers can disagree. There is a limit, that is, to how fundamental our disagreement can be, if we are to have good reason to take each other to be peers. For as our disagreement deepens, the grounds I have for taking you to be my peer shrink.³³ And the less reason I have to treat you as my peer, the less epistemically significant our disagreement can be.

To see how this applies to moral disagreements, compare three cases:

- A. You and Ann disagree about the permissibility of abortion. You agree on all other moral matters and are on the same side of the political spectrum.
- B. You and Beth also disagree about the permissibility of abortion, but you disagree about a myriad of other moral matters as well. You are on opposite sides of the political spectrum.
- C. You and Clarisse also disagree about the permissibility of abortion, but you also disagree about *every* other moral matter. Clarisse is a homicidal sociopath.³⁴

Intuitively, your disagreement with Ann has the most undermining potential; your disagreement with Clarisse the least. This is exactly what Conciliationism predicts. The better common ground you share with someone,

the more significant their disagreement could be. This is because the better common ground you share, the better independent ground you have on which to evaluate their epistemic credentials, and thus the significance of your disagreement. You have good independent ground on which to evaluate your disagreement with Ann; you have none with Clarisse.

Plausibly, also, you do not have good reason to take Clarisse to be your peer. This, too, is what Conciliationism predicts. You take someone to be your peer, remember, if you think that, conditional on you two disagreeing, you're equally likely to be right. If that judgment must be made on grounds independent of the dispute, and if you have nothing independent of your dispute with Clarisse, then you have no reason to take Clarisse to be your peer.

Discussing a similar case, Kornblith argues that while characters like Ann and Beth should be troubled by disagreements with one another, they shouldn't be troubled by disagreements with characters like Clarisse.³⁵ He explains:

... the reason why they should not is precisely that, when we subtract the moral issues on which Ann or Beth disagree with [Clarisse], from the totality of moral issues, there is virtually nothing left at all on which they might base a judgment that [Clarisse] is, but for their little disagreement, generally reliable about moral issues.³⁶

This suggests that there is an inverse relation between how confident I should be that you are my peer and how deep our disagreement goes. The deeper the disagreement, the less confident my evaluations of your epistemic credentials. And the less confident those evaluations, the less significant our disagreement can be.

The picture we get here is of a scale. On one end, we have Clarisse and Caligula—moral monsters with whom we have no common ground. On the other end we have people with whom we see eye to eye on most moral matters, disagreeing, perhaps, about just one. The epistemic significance of disagreement diminishes as we get closer to the Clarisse and Caligula side of the scale. This is because the more we slide in that direction, the less good independent reason we can get to take these people to be our peers. This is why our disagreement with Ann is the most troubling, and our disagreement with Clarisse the least.

The upshot is that there are many characters we might be inclined to think of as peers, but that we have no reason to think are as, or more, likely to be right as us. Such characters include Clarisse, Caligula, Setiya's stranger, and other moral monsters. Thus, we needn't defer to such moral monsters—not, at least, on Conciliatory grounds.

6. A worry: can we really dismiss moral monsters so easily?

Conciliationism holds that disagreement requires agnosticism only to the extent that it is a disagreement with someone you have good reason to take to

be (at least) a peer. I argued, above, that we don't have good reason to take as peers moral monsters and others with whom we have no common ground.

You might worry that this is not sufficient reason to dismiss an opinion. Maybe it isn't enough that I lack information about your epistemic credentials, maybe I also need good reason to think my credentials are superior. You might worry, in other words, that it isn't enough that I don't know whether you are my epistemic peer. I need to think that I am your epistemic superior. Without good, independent reason to think I am *better* positioned than you are, perhaps I must suspend belief about the disputed matter.

Nathan King presents a similar worry. He agrees that "a good peer is hard to find", but doesn't think this helps Conciliationism avoid skepticism.³⁷ This is because he thinks that skepticism follows from Conciliationism plus uncertainty about the relative strength of our epistemic credentials.

The sort of uncertainty King has in mind includes cases in which one is "less than fully confident that one's position is superior to that of one's dissenter" as well as cases like the above, in which one withholds belief about, or is agnostic with respect to this claim. In such cases, he argues, it is plausible that our belief in the disputed matter is "at least partially" defeated. "For instance," he continues, "it is hard to see how one's belief that P can be rational if one considers, but withholds concerning the claim that one's total epistemic position renders one more likely to be correct than one's dissenter".³⁸ Thus, in order to dismiss your opinion, according to King, I have to have reason to think my position is superior—and that reason had better be a strong one if it is to be able to do the necessary work.

Let's focus on the first bit—the claim that I can only dismiss your opinion if I have good reason to think I am in a better position than you. This means, contrary to what I've argued above, that I cannot dismiss your opinion simply because I have no view about our relative positions.

This is *prima facie* plausible, but mistaken. This is because it presupposes an epistemic principle that is too strong for a theory of disagreement. To see this, compare two ways we might formulate the Conciliationist's Independence principle. Both say that your evaluation of your friend's epistemic credentials must be independent. They differ, however, in exactly what this independent evaluation must yield if it is to require agnosticism. Compare:

- A. Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation fails to give me good reason for confidence that I'm better informed, or more likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly, I must revise my belief in the direction of the other person's.

This principle states that if I have no independent reason to think I'm more likely to be right, I must revise my belief. Call this the **No Independent Reason Principle**, or **NIRP**.

- B. Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation gives me good reason to be confident that the other person is equally well-informed, and equally likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly, I must revise my belief in the direction of the other person's.³⁹

This principle states that if I have good independent reason to think you are as likely as I am to be right, then I must revise my belief. Call this the **Good Independent Reason Principle**, or **GIRP**.

These principles are subtly but importantly different. The first, NIRP, implies that, in order to dismiss your opinion, I need to have good reason to think I'm more likely to be right than you are. The second, GIRP, implies that the *only* case in which I *cannot* dismiss your opinion, is that in which I have good reason to think you are (at least) as likely as I am to be right. It remains silent on what to do in any other situation.

NIRP is stronger than GIRP. It requires revision in more cases. But, it is too strong for a principle about disagreement. Accepting it commits us to a much more pervasive skepticism, one that applies to all of our beliefs—moral and non-moral. To see this, notice how NIRP handles deep disagreements in which someone disagrees with us about virtually everything. As Christensen notes:

That would leave me with virtually nothing on which to base a dispute-independent evaluation of the relative likelihood of [the dissenter's] reasoning correctly. But such a baseless evaluation would clearly not give me a good reason for confidence in my having reasoned correctly; so principle (A) would require massive revision in my beliefs. The problem with (A) is that it in effect turns out to require that one have a non-question-begging response to the skeptic.⁴⁰

Imagine, in other words, that you meet someone that disagrees with you not only about all moral matters, but also about all non-moral matters. You disagree about *everything*. This means that you have no common ground, and so, crucially, no dispute-independent ground. Return now to the above scale from Ann to Beth to Clarisse and Caligula. This character, call her Zelda, is beyond even Caligula on this scale. At least with Caligula we can agree that snow is white and grass is green.⁴¹ The upshot is that you have no good independent reason to take Zelda to be your peer. But nor do you have any good independent reason to think you're getting things right. This is because, in this case, you have no reasons at all. GIRP recognizes this and does not require you to revise. It only requires you to revise when you have good reason to think you have made a mistake. NIRP sees no difference between ordinary, everyday disagreements among people that rightly take one another to be peers, and these extraordinary disagreements with moral monsters and ideally coherent eccentrics. NIRP thus makes no distinction between the case in which we have good reason to think we are mistaken, and the case in which we have no such reason.

NIRP is thus the wrong principle for a theory of disagreement.⁴² This is first, because it cannot distinguish between importantly distinct cases. It treats your disagreement with Ann as equally significant as your disagreement with Zelda. But, intuitively, these disagreements are not equally significant.

NIRP is inappropriate in this context for a second reason. The problem of the epistemic significance of disagreement is supposed to be distinct from the general problem of skepticism. At the very least, our problem requires that there be actual disagreement. General skeptical worries can be raised without any empirical premises. Furthermore, the worry we have been discussing for Conciliatory views—the worry that they entail moral skepticism—is also supposed to be different from the worry that we have no non-question-begging response to the moral skeptic. It is also supposed to be a problem for our moral beliefs—it shouldn't generalize, therefore, beyond the moral domain. This is the dialectic. It shows why NIRP-type principles are inappropriate in this context. They threaten a more global skepticism.⁴³

GIRP doesn't have these implications. If someone challenges all of my beliefs, an independent evaluation—one based on dispute-independent grounds—"cannot provide good reason for me to be confident about either party's likelihood of having reasoned correctly."⁴⁴ This is because such an independent evaluation cannot provide me with any reasons—much less good ones—on which to base this judgment. So it cannot provide good reason for me to think that we are equally likely to have reasoned correctly.

The earlier worry that I cannot dismiss disagreements with ideally coherent moral monsters, like Caligula, is often presented this way: "How can I deny that they are my peers?"⁴⁵ This worry emerges from the, perhaps implicit, assumption of the stronger, NIRP-type principle above. But this is the wrong principle for a theory of disagreement.

In response to the worry that I cannot dismiss the opinions of ideally coherent moral monsters, we can thus say the following. The less reason you have for taking someone to be your peer, the less reason you have for taking her opinion into account. It is a mistake, then, when faced with someone like Caligula, to ask: how could I possibly dismiss this opinion? We should ask, instead: what reasons do I have for taking this opinion seriously? Specifically, what grounds do I have for thinking that Caligula is my peer? The right answer is none. That is also the answer Conciliationism gives.

Thus, we shouldn't ask, when faced with a disagreement: how I could possibly think I am more likely to be right than my opponent? We should ask instead: do I have any reason to think that we are equally likely to be right? The reason for this isn't dialectical—it isn't about where the burden of proof lies, but about the nature of the challenge from disagreement. These are the right questions to ask because these are the questions that help us determine whether we are faced with evidence of error. They help us determine whether we have good, not merely skeptical, reason to think that we are mistaken.

7. Another worry: skepticism returns?

I have argued that we needn't lose confidence in our moral beliefs simply because moral monsters—whether possible or actual—disagree with us. Such confidence loss isn't warranted on Conciliationist grounds. This is because Conciliationists take the problematic cases of disagreement to be ones in which we have good reason to treat those with whom we disagree as peers. To have such reason, we must be able to judge that, independent of our dispute, we are equally likely to be right. In the extreme cases, of moral monsters like Caligula and other ideally coherent eccentrics like Zelda, we have little to no independent ground from which to make such a judgment. So we have, in such cases, little or no reason to take such characters to be our epistemic peers. So we cannot conclude that they are.

Adam Elga defends his version of Conciliationism in just this way.⁴⁶ He argues that if a disagreement goes deep enough so that there is little or no independent ground from which to evaluate our respective epistemic credentials, there may be “no fact of the matter” about what you should believe about the disputed issue—no fact of the matter, that is, according to Conciliationism.⁴⁷ In defense of this, Elga provides the following analogy.

Suppose that you know Jennifer Lopez from both personal interactions and tabloid reports.

[Then,] there is a determinate answer to the question, “What is your opinion of Lopez, setting aside what the tabloids say?” That is because there is a relatively self-contained path along which the tabloids influence your beliefs about Lopez. As a result, there is a natural way of factoring your belief state into a “prior” state, together with some additional tabloid-based information.

In contrast, there is no determinate answer to the question: “What is your opinion of Lopez, setting aside that humans have bodies and that the Earth exists?” That is because there is no unique way of factoring your belief state into a “prior” state, together with that additional information. Setting aside that humans have bodies and that the Earth exists, how confident are you that Lopez dated Ben Affleck? Or that one of Lopez's movies was recently panned by critics? Or that Hollywood even exists? These questions have no answers because the information to be set aside is enmeshed in too much of your reasoning to be cleanly factored off.⁴⁸

Just as there is no fact of the matter about what you think of Jennifer Lopez, setting aside the existence of the external world, there is no fact of the matter about what you think of Zelda's epistemic credentials, setting aside everything you believe. In such cases, Elga argues, Conciliationism “issues no determinate verdict”.⁴⁹ Where there is no fact of the matter about what I think of your epistemic credentials, Conciliationism remains silent.

Notice, however, just how silent Conciliationism is here. Conciliationism doesn't say we must treat these eccentrics as epistemic peers, but also it doesn't

say that we may treat them as epistemic inferiors. Conciliationism thus doesn't say that we may be confident that we are more likely than they are to get things right. We lack good independent reason to think that Caligula is as likely as we are to be right because there are no independent reasons. There cannot, therefore, be independent reasons to think that *we* are more likely to be right. Thus, Conciliationism doesn't say you must become agnostic in the face of such disagreements. Nor does it tell you that you may go on confidently believing.

This suggestion, that where Conciliationism remains silent, there we can go on believing as before, is meant to block the skeptical inference. Setiya worries, however, that this is an *ad hoc* way of avoiding skepticism. He also worries that it fails to respect the original idea behind Conciliationism, and that respecting that idea pushes us into another, equally bad form of skepticism. He puts it thus:

The idea behind the [Conciliatory] view is that one's post-confrontation credence should match what one's prior conditional credence should have been. Indeterminacy in the latter should be tracked by indeterminacy in the former.⁵⁰

In other words, if there is no fact of the matter about what I should think of your epistemic credentials, then there should, again, be no fact of the matter about what I should think about the disputed issue. This is what Conciliationism is committed to, according to Setiya, insofar as it employs the kind of epistemic principle that I have been arguing it should—one that remains silent in cases of deep disagreement.

But this, Setiya argues, is no help at all. Rather, it is the basis of an equally troubling skepticism. If we grant that there is no fact of the matter about my opinion of your epistemic credentials, then,

... the sceptical inference can be revived: not that your credence should be low, in the face of radical disagreement, but that it is indeterminate what it should be, or that it should be indeterminate, or that you should be totally unsure—different kinds of sceptical result, perhaps, but no better than the one we feared.⁵¹

If this is right, then adopting GIRP rather than NIRP cannot save Conciliationism from skepticism. Conciliationism may not require low confidence, or agnosticism about the disputed matters. However, it seems to require something almost as bad: it requires that there be no fact of the matter about our attitude toward disputed matters.

This objection presupposes that Conciliationism is a theory about what it would be all-things-considered rational to believe. But this is wrong. Conciliationism is a theory of how to respond to one particular type of evidence.⁵² Therefore, the fact that Conciliationism remains silent in such cases does not entail that rationality must also remain silent. There may well be a fact about what we ought to believe, but that fact is determined independently of Conciliationism.

This is as it should be. Conciliationism aims to isolate one sort of potentially undermining evidence, and to tell us how to rationally respond to it. The relevant evidence is that of disagreement, but, as we have seen, not just any disagreement

will do. The disagreement must be with someone I have good independent reason to think is at least as likely as I am to be right. Such disagreements are the relevant kind because they provide evidence of error. Such disagreements give us reason to think that we have made a mistake—they give us reason to think that we are not living up to our epistemic standards. However disturbing they may be, disagreements with ideally coherent characters like Caligula and Zelda do not provide such evidence. The disagreement with Zelda cannot. Since her epistemic standards are radically different, learning that you disagree gives you no reason to think you're not living up to yours.⁵³

None of this means that our disagreement with Zelda is insignificant. Its significance, however, is not for Conciliationism to determine. That is a job for our more general theory of rationality, of which Conciliationism is just one part. And there is no quick answer to what rationality requires with regard to such cases. This is because answering that question requires giving a theory of rationality—and that is, for most of us, a work in progress.

Let's be optimistic for a moment, however, and suppose that rationality allows me to remain confident in the face of these more extraordinary disagreements. Perhaps when Conciliationism doesn't apply, I can take my reasons at face value—perhaps I needn't bracket them away. If so, then when Conciliationism remains silent, I can go on believing as before. If, before my disagreement with Caligula, I was rational in believing that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong, then I am still rational in believing it. (If I wasn't, then I'm not—but that's not Caligula's fault.)

It would be nice if we could confidently condemn moral monsters in this way. However, this smacks of a kind of epistemic narcissism that seems very much against the spirit of Conciliationism. Independence was meant to block an inappropriate privileging of one's own position—but isn't that what we'd be doing here?

One version of this worry we've already dismissed. It presupposes the stronger Independence principle, NIRP, and asks: how can I go on confidently believing that *p* when I have no good (independent) reason to think that I'm right about *p*? I grant the intuitive pull of skeptical principles like NIRP, as should anyone who has ever been gripped by the problem of Cartesian Skepticism. Insofar as we feel this pull, we are unlikely to shake the discomfort of continuing to believe in such cases. To give in to that discomfort, however, is to give ourselves up to the skeptic. That may be reason enough to resist it. In this context, however, we have another reason: this isn't the skeptical problem we are trying to solve. So we should ignore it.

There is a better version of this worry, however, which doesn't presuppose the wrong epistemic principle. The worry is this: if I am allowed to take my reasons at face value in these cases, and ignore contrary opinions, why can't I do it elsewhere? In other words, if such dismissal is appropriate toward Caligula, why isn't it appropriate in more ordinary cases?

There are two things to say here. The first is that disagreement with Caligula provides very different sort of evidence than disagreement with Ann or Beth. Different cases like these should be treated differently. This is why Conciliationism gets things right. But can it do so in a principled way? Yes, and this brings us to the second thing. When Conciliationism issues a verdict, we must follow that verdict. It is only where it remains silent that we can do what we want (constrained by other rules of rationality, of course). To see why this is not *ad hoc*, consider an analogy.⁵⁴

David Lewis's Principal Principle states, roughly, that rational agents credences should be constrained by their knowledge of objective chances.⁵⁵ This principle tells me what to believe when I get information about objective chances. It remains silent in the absences of such information. When the Principal Principle applies—when I have information about objective chances—following it is non-optional. When it remains silent, other things determine what I ought to believe.

The Conciliatory principle should be understood the same way. If the right sort of disagreement triggers it, then we must do what it says. If not, then we are on our own, with only our more general theory of rationality to guide us.

8. Remaining problem cases

Let's take stock. The above considerations go some ways toward undermining the claim that moral disagreement among peers abounds. They show that some apparent moral disagreements among peers aren't really *moral* disagreements, while others aren't really *peer* disagreements.

Problem cases remain, however. Both are plausibly peer disagreements, and both plausibly require agnosticism, according to Conciliationism.

Ordinary Peer Disagreement. Friends who agree on many moral matters, yet disagree on, e.g., the permissibility of abortion, euthanasia, or capital punishment.

Philosophical Peer Disagreement. Philosophers who disagree on the truth of, e.g., deontology or consequentialism, internalism or externalism, etc.

Both cases are realistic and familiar. Who among us hasn't felt the challenge of an unexpected dissenting opinion from a respected friend? These are also the most important cases for our purposes. If anything threatens to push us toward moral skepticism, it is these.

In the first case, the friends disagree about a first-order moral matter—about whether a certain act is permissible. The philosophers' disagreement in the second case is deeper. They disagree on moral principles.⁵⁶ These disagreements too, should be familiar.

The worry about the second sort of disagreements arises from the thought that surely Korsgaard and Singer, Williams and Parfit, Aristotle and Kant—

surely these people, if any, are epistemic peers, or close enough. They disagree wildly about reasons for action, and also about what we should do. If their disagreements about principles lead to disagreements about cases, that would be very many disagreements to worry about.

I'll consider each of these cases in turn. But first, a few reminders about what these cases must be like, if they are to be remaining problem cases.

First, these disagreements must not be explainable away in non-moral terms. They also mustn't go too deep, for, the deeper they go, the less threatening they are. Both of these requirements substantially restrict the number of relevant cases.

The second requirement is less likely to be met in philosophical disagreements, since those go deeper than the disagreements about cases. Philosophers are thus bound to have less good grounds from which to evaluate each other's epistemic credentials. But suppose there are some such cases in which the disagreements do not go too deep. That smaller class of cases is the relevant one.

The extent of the disagreement for philosophical cases is limited in yet another way. Disagreements about moral principles may lead to disagreements about cases. But I suspect that is the exception and not the rule. Deontologists and consequentialists, for example, agree on a wide range of cases. They give different explanations of why it's wrong to kick puppies or lie to people, and they may also disagree on whether it's *always*, or only sometimes, wrong. But they can still agree that we shouldn't kick puppies.

For example, both Mill and Kant can agree that we shouldn't kick puppies. Mill would think this for the standard utilitarian reasons: puppies are sentient creatures, pain is bad, etc. Kant seems to think we shouldn't kick puppies because it corrupts our moral character and increases the likelihood of us kicking morally relevant creatures like humans. But still, he does think we shouldn't kick puppies. Contemporary Kantians may have better explanations, but, crucially, they too agree that we shouldn't kick puppies.⁵⁷

Even the cases about which some strict applications of the theories disagree, proponents of those theories hold more nuanced positions. Evidence for this is the dancing around lying that Kantians do, and Consequentialists attempts to demonstrate that either, no, they don't condone horrible things like slavery, or, if they do, it isn't the "bad" kind of slavery.⁵⁸ This is yet more evidence that there are fewer cases of philosophical disagreement to worry about than we might have thought.⁵⁹

The number of ordinary peer disagreements we have to worry about is also small. This is because many of them are unlikely to meet both requirements of (a) not bottoming out in a non-moral matter, or (b) not going too deep.

I suspect that many disagreements among friends who share a basic world-view come down to some non-moral matter. If they don't, they threaten to go too deep. For, if the reason we disagree about abortion turns out to be that we disagree about what morality requires, then we have less independent ground than we thought.

It might start to look, at this point, as if a genuinely *moral* disagreement can only be over the truth of some fundamental moral principle, or some basic moral belief, like the belief that pain is bad. If it is a principle, and that principle is too fundamental, then we have virtually no independent ground to go on. If it is a belief, and that belief is something like the belief that pain is bad, then we have again hit the bottom. What reason could I possibly have for thinking that someone who disagrees with me about something as basic as whether pain is bad is as likely as I am to be right about morality? Furthermore, I am unlikely to come across a person who thinks this—much less one I have good reason to treat as a peer.

I worry, therefore, about how many actual disagreements meet these requirements. For the sake of argument, however, let's set this worry aside. There are at least some peer disagreements which aren't, at root, non-moral, and which don't go too deep. What should we say about those, however few they may be?

Here I think, we can finally and rightly say, that we should be agnostic. This, of course, is exactly what Conciliationism says. So Conciliationism might require us to be agnostic about some moral matters. But this more limited skepticism is, I'll now argue, independently plausible and not at all absurd.

9. Our unfortunate epistemic situation

We have seen that there may not be very many peer disagreements about moral matters. Of those that there are, many will be best explained in terms of errors—often systematic ones—or, as Shafer-Landau puts it, 'processing failures' on one or both sides of the disagreement.

Such processing failures cover a wide range of cases, from errors of instrumental reasoning, to a failure of nerve, sympathy, empathy, or imagination. One explanation (not the only one) of these errors is that there's typically much more personally at stake in ethical matters than in scientific ones, and these stakes tend to introduce biasing factors that skew correct perception. It may be that for any given real-world ethical disagreement, we could cite at least one of these failings as an explanation for its continued existence.⁶⁰

Shafer-Landau suggests here that where there is more at stake for us, personally or politically, such processing failures are more likely. This suggests that epistemic conditions are especially poor with respect to some moral matters. Error is, therefore, especially likely, so it is independently plausible that we should be agnostic about such matters. If Conciliationism counsels agnosticism here, this is a virtue of the view, not a vice.

When epistemic conditions are poor, then, disagreement can serve as a red flag, alerting us that something has gone wrong. In a way, there is nothing special about the moral case. Bias, groupthink, and the like can lead us to poorly thought out views about all kinds of non-moral matters. We seem more prone to such

errors with respect to moral matters, however. This is in part because of our epistemic faults. But it is also because, typically, our evidence for moral matters is murky.

Some moral disagreements are thus best explained by the paucity of the available evidence. This is, I suspect, also the case with many of our philosophical beliefs. (The disagreement between Korsgaard and Singer, about what the true fundamental moral principle is, may well be best explained in this way.) Our evidence may be poor because there isn't much of it, because it isn't conclusive, or because it is too hard to evaluate.

Lack of evidence or inconclusive evidence should surely warrant agnosticism—or, at most, a low level of confidence. But with morality, religion, politics, and other such stuff of which our identities and lives are made, it is hard to let go. And it is easy to convince ourselves that continuing to believe is rational. Disagreement can be a reminder that it is not.

Our evidential situation may be poor even when there is a lot of evidence. This can be, for example, because it is hard to evaluate the evidence—there's too much of it, it is unclear what counts as evidence, or we are unable to objectively evaluate the evidence.

Consider the question of whether the death penalty has deterrent effects. Maybe it is clear what the relevant evidence is: graphs and charts of crime rates in various states. Maybe it is also clear how to evaluate it: using statistics. It may even be clear how to assess the requisite abilities: there are better and worse statisticians. It may nevertheless be difficult to evaluate the evidence. Maybe there are too many charts and graphs. Or maybe our political leanings blind and bias us.

It gets worse for even more difficult moral questions. It can be hard to say, about those, what even counts as evidence. Insofar as we can identify our body of evidence, it will typically be murky in hard cases like these, so we should expect the rational confidence level to be lower than in easier cases.⁶¹

A minimally humble agent should, therefore, see difficult moral questions as veritable minefields of error. She should proceed with caution and already be closer to agnosticism, even before discovering any disagreement. This isn't so for disagreements like those in *Restaurant* and *Stoplight*—there, we don't expect disagreement among highly and equally reliable people.⁶² There it makes sense to have a high initial confidence. Disagreement has more power there, where it is more surprising. When we discover disagreement about moral matters about which we are antecedently highly confident, then, that disagreement should worry us. It suggests that the matter is more difficult than we thought. Once we recognize that the best explanation for most of our moral disagreements is our poor epistemic situation, we can see that Conciliationism is right to counsel agnosticism. The agnosticism here is independently warranted—independent of what Conciliationism may or may not advise.

Perhaps our evidential situation with respect to morality really is this bad, or perhaps bias and other noise distorts our moral beliefs. If that is so, then we

really are faced with moral skepticism. But this skepticism is a limited skepticism. It applies to moral principles and difficult moral matters, but not to all moral matters. This skepticism is, furthermore, not just an unfortunate and implausible consequence of Conciliatory views of disagreement. Nor is it a problem for these views. On the contrary, if a view of disagreement rules we should be less confident with respect to such matters, then, that view is getting things exactly right.

10. How much moral skepticism are we really left with?

I cannot say exactly how much moral skepticism we are left with. I hope, however, to have shown that whatever skepticism we are stuck with isn't as bad as many have thought. I hope, also, to have provided a framework for thinking about these issues—one we can use to think about particular cases of actual disagreement we face.

If you're at all convinced that Conciliationism doesn't entail mass agnosticism, you might now have a new worry. Does it entail enough agnosticism? Conciliationism was supposed to be an interesting view with surprising results. If I am right, however, Conciliationism may really be quite toothless.

Conciliationism isn't as radical as you might have thought. It is far from toothless, however. It still requires substantial revisions to our moral beliefs. Plausibly, people like Korsgaard and Singer should probably take one another to be epistemic peers. If so, then Conciliationism rules that they should be agnostic about the truth of their views, and about much else in the debate between deontologists and consequentialists. This verdict will hold for other such disagreements about difficult moral matters.

What emerges is a picture on which our epistemic situation about moral matters looks a lot like our epistemic situation about scientific matters. We agree on the easy stuff—on a lot of the cases. These beliefs are also those with respect to which our evidence is clear. The more difficult things get, the more we disagree. And our evidence about such matters is typically murky. As physics becomes increasingly theoretical, for example, disputes among scientists become harder to settle. The situation with respect to our moral beliefs seems similar: no one disagrees about whether pain is bad or whether we ought to kick puppies. Many people disagree about what the right theory to explain that is. The more theoretical we get, or the murkier our evidence, the more we disagree.⁶³

A final note on the dialectic, before I conclude. If you were antecedently inclined toward moral skepticism, and liked Conciliationism because it seemed to lead us there, you'll be disappointed in my results. If that's how you feel, you probably also prefer the stronger version of the Independence principle (namely, NIRP). You can opt for that principle, but then you'll owe us a motivation for it, an argument for why it is the appropriate principle to use in this context, and a story about how it doesn't collapse the problem of disagreement into a more general, *a priori* skepticism about moral and non-moral matters alike.

This paper, however, was never intended for those already inclined toward massive moral skepticism. To them I can only say: sorry to disappoint. Conciliationism is a much more conservative view than they might have hoped. The paper is aimed instead at those who rejected Conciliationism because they thought it got the wrong verdict in cases of moral disagreement. Them I urge to reconsider. With this worry about moral skepticism out of the way, you may find that anything your view of disagreement can do, Conciliationism can do better.

11. Conclusion

The fact of moral disagreement, when conjoined with an independently attractive view about the significance of such disagreement, seems to entail skepticism. This worries those who like Conciliationism, the independently attractive view, but dislike moral skepticism. Others, equally inclined against moral skepticism, think this is a *reductio* of Conciliationism.

I have aimed to show that moral skepticism, when understood as mass agnosticism about morality, does not follow from Conciliationism. This is because for one class of moral disagreements, Conciliationism doesn't require agnosticism. For another, smaller class, the agnosticism isn't absurd.

Conciliationism doesn't require agnosticism for some of these cases because they aren't cases of genuine peer disagreement. The genuine peer disagreement cases, which are few, are ones for which agnosticism is required. But there's nothing absurd about that. These are exactly the sort of difficult and controversial matters about which we should grant, independently, that we cannot have confident opinions. Insofar as Conciliationism requires agnosticism here, then, it simply tracks the fact of our bad epistemic situation.

Our epistemic situation isn't bad with respect to all moral matters. We know that we have reason to avoid pain and take care of our children, for example. About such things, however, one is hard pressed to find disagreement. And if one does find it, it won't be peer disagreement.

Some non-moral or non-peer disagreements may, nevertheless, continue to worry us. We may well keep wondering what we could possibly say to the moral skeptic or to an ideally coherent Caligula. When we worry about this, however, we are invoking something other than the independently plausible view that disagreement can be evidence of error. This view doesn't tell us that *these* disagreements are evidence of error, and so it doesn't require us to be agnostic about such matters.⁶⁴

Notes

1. Proponents of Conciliatory views of disagreement include Christensen [2007], Elga [2007], Feldman [2006], Sidgwick [1907] 342, and others. Some people talk

about the Equal Weight View, rather than Conciliationism, but the former is just a kind of the latter.

2. I will use these terms interchangeably here.
3. For a defense of this sort of argument see Feldman [2006] and [2007], Kornblith [2010], and Christensen [2007] 215. None of these authors take the skepticism to be absurd. King [2012] responds to this argument, but differently than I do. More on this later.
4. This is how Setiya [2012] intends it.
5. Street [2006] argues from the fact of this agreement to moral skepticism. Street's aim is ultimately a *reductio* of moral realism, but an absurd sort of moral skepticism is her first stop.
6. See Christensen [2007] 214–15.
7. This presupposes some relationship between degrees of confidence and all-or-nothing beliefs, but nothing here hangs on there being some such straightforward relationship. I find it most helpful to think about these issues in terms of degrees of confidence, and will make important points using that framework. But sometimes a point is made more vividly in all-or-nothing terms. This is how Setiya [2012] puts this worry in his recent attack on Conciliationism. Certainly, the skepticism seems scarier if we must 'abandon' or 'suspend' belief or succumb to 'mass agnosticism', rather than just 'lower our confidence'. I hope to make the skepticism seem as bad as possible before I dismiss it, so will talk mostly in all or nothing terms. I'll sometimes slip into talk of confidence to remind us that things are more complicated. Mostly, I'll use the terms interchangeably without effects on my overall argument.
8. Setiya [2012] 12.
9. Setiya [2012] 12.
10. Mackie [1977] 36.
11. See Mackie [1977] and Brink [1984] on their use of 'moral skepticism'.
12. There is only one challenge I know of to the claim that possible disagreement is not as significant as actual disagreement. Kelly [2005] argues that if actual disagreement is epistemically significant, then possible disagreement must also be epistemically significant. Importantly for our dialectic, Kelly's aim in that paper is not to establish that possible disagreement is epistemically significant, but to attack Conciliationism by showing that it is committed to the significance of possible disagreement, which Kelly takes to be absurd.
13. Setiya [2012] 19–20.
14. Street [2009].
15. Street [2009] 280.
16. Thinking about disagreements with moral monsters or moral skeptics may provide a way into thinking through deeper questions about what justifications we have available for our views. So we may have other reasons to dwell on them. Not in this context, however, and not for these reasons. Furthermore, I'm not sure that thinking through these kinds of cases is good for the other reasons either. There is an important distinction between being justified in believing *p* and being able to provide a non-question-begging justification of *p* to a skeptic (see Williamson [2004] and [2007]). Approaching the question of what justification we have for our moral beliefs by thinking about what we would say to the moral skeptic can

mislead us into thinking we lack justification, when, in fact, we simply lack a justification that the skeptic would accept.

17. Even Setiya, whom I'll pick on later, agrees: "It is not troubling to concede that certain questions in ethics are so controversial, so difficult to resolve, that we should doubt that we have got them right" ([2012] 18).
18. Christensen [2007], Feldman [2006], Elga [2007], Vavova [2014], and others discuss similar examples. All hold that disagreement is epistemically significant in exactly this sort of case. Notably, even opponents agree: see Kelly [2010], Lackey [2010], and Sosa [2010]. Possible exceptions include Weatherson [ms] and Kelly [2005].
19. For further discussion of these cases see Vavova [2014].
20. Elga [2007] fn. 21. Some require more for peerhood. For example, some think that we must also share the same evidence and have the same epistemic virtues (see Kelly [2005] 174–5 and King [2012] 252–3). This makes it almost impossible for two people to be epistemic peers. This is why King [2012] thinks that there's no skeptical problem for Conciliatory views. I think he's right on two counts: there is no skeptical problem, and if this is how we understand peerhood, then skepticism doesn't follow. I just think this is the wrong way to understand peerhood.
21. There is at least one important disanalogy between the disagreements in Restaurant and Stoplight, and moral disagreements. In the former, our methods of belief formation are relatively unmythical—mental math, perception. We know, furthermore, what it is for such methods to function properly. Our method of moral belief formation is more mythical. Anyone who is not a moral skeptic needs a story here. They need to explain: What is the relation between our moral beliefs and the moral truths, such that we can be non-accidentally correct with respect to those truths? More generally, how is moral knowledge possible? To answer these questions would be to give a moral epistemology, and it is controversial what the right moral epistemology is. I think that this view of disagreement is compatible with different moral epistemologies, so the question of how we get moral knowledge is both orthogonal to the question about moral disagreement, and beyond the scope of this paper. I do hope, however, that the lessons of this paper can shed some light on the epistemological landscape of our moral beliefs—on both the extent of our moral knowledge, and the areas for which we tend to lack it.
22. How I must revise in light of disagreement depends on a number of other factors as well, including whether the disagreement is unexpected or old news. See Vavova [2014].
23. King [2012] suggests that this sort of uncertainty does require agnosticism, and that there is, therefore, a better argument for disagreement-based skepticism. I will come back to this below.
24. Why is it 'your evaluation' of epistemic credentials that matters, rather than the actual credentials? Our disagreement can be worrying even if we aren't peers—so long as we have good reason to take each other to be peers. This is because, in short, misleading evidence is evidence. See Elga [2007] fn. 14 in defense of this point. Notice also that it isn't enough that we are actually peers, we must have good reason to take each other to be peers. Otherwise, the mere existence of a disagreeing peer could require agnosticism—even if we don't know that this peer exists. That seems wrong, but also against the spirit of the view, which is about how to take into account evidence of error.

25. Some statements of Independence explicitly require only that I set aside my reasoning for p , and not my belief that p (see Christensen [2011] 1–2, Lord [2014] 366, Setiya [2012] 17). Of course, if my belief that p is based on reasoning which I can no longer rely on, I will end up having to set aside p as well. In those cases, my version of Independence and this other, briefer one, will have the same verdict. However, mine is preferable for two reasons. First, the motivation for setting aside my reasoning for p —namely, avoiding a bad kind of question-begging—applies *mutatis mutandis* to setting aside p . This is reason enough for adopting my longer principle, but there’s another. The briefer principle gets the wrong results in cases of non-evidentially justified belief (thanks to Kieran Setiya for pointing this out). If my belief is justified independently of my reasoning for it, then setting aside that reasoning won’t require me to set that belief aside. I’ll then be able to dismiss your testimony in the question-begging way Independence is supposed to block: “I know that before we disagreed I thought we were equally likely to get this right. But p ! So it must be you who is mistaken.” If this doesn’t sound sufficiently bad to you as a response to peer disagreement, imagine it as a response to disagreement with an expert you have excellent reason to take to be your epistemic superior.
26. Christensen [2011] 2. Kelly’s [2005] explicitly rejects Conciliationism and the Independence principle (though not under these labels). By rejecting Independence, Kelly can maintain that epistemic peer disagreement isn’t epistemically significant. However, this commits him to the claim that disagreement with epistemic superiors is not epistemically significant either—contrary to what he explicitly says (see p. 173). Weatherson [ms], whose view most resembles Kelly’s [2005], might be comfortable with this implication.
27. Of course, there are worries about Independence. For one, we must say more about what counts as appropriately independent, and how to set aside what is not independent. It is also not obvious how to characterize this ‘setting aside’ formally. For a discussion of these problems, as well as a defense of Independence see Christensen [2011] 18. Notice, also, however, that even opponents of Independence, like Miriam Schoenfield, agree that “in many cases, it is quite straightforward how to set aside one’s reasoning about p , especially when one can simply refer to one’s attitude at an earlier time (before the reasoning took place)” ([2012] fn. 28).
28. It protects them too, in this way, of course. They aren’t required to take you to be their peer either. But that is as it should be. Neither of you has good reason to think you are equally likely to be right.
29. Christensen [2007a] argues that my belief that p can be undermined even if my evidence entails it.
30. Lackey [2010] puts the problem in terms of defeaters.
31. See Shafer-Landau [2005] and Sturgeon [1988].
32. Both opponents and proponents agree here. See Setiya [2012] 19 and Kornblith [2010] 45–6.
33. See sections 4.1–2 above, Christensen [2011] 16, Elga [2007] 492–3, King [2012] 256–7.
34. For a similar case see Kornblith [2010] 50.

35. Kornblith is responding here to Elga's claim that characters like Ann and Beth have no reason to take each other to be peers (Elga [2007] 492–3). Kornblith is right to object to Elga's example: Ann and Beth do seem to have enough to go on to be worried about each other's opinions. If what I've argued above is right, however, Elga's general strategy is good. Ann's disagreement with Beth won't be as significant as her disagreement with someone with whom she shares more common ground.
36. Kornblith [2010] 50.
37. King [2012].
38. King [2012] 268.
39. Christensen [2011] 15. In other contexts, I have distinguished between similar principles of belief revision and argued against the analogues of A. For discussion of these principles in the context of evolutionary debunking arguments, see my [2014a]. For discussion in the context of irrelevant influences more generally, see my [ms].
40. Christensen [2011] 14–15.
41. This claim, that I'm a position to evaluate Caligula's epistemic credentials even though we disagree about all of morality, presupposes a kind of continuity between the moral and non-moral domains, which I find plausible. It explains why Caligula's disagreement should worry me more than Zelda's. I don't have any independent ground from which to judge Zelda's reliability on moral matters; I have some for Caligula. The independent ground I have from which to judge Caligula's reliability, however, is all non-moral. So, you might worry that you need some independent moral ground in order to judge reliability with respect to moral matters. I find this plausible also. If it's right, then our disagreement with Caligula is no more significant than our disagreement with Zelda, so there are fewer cases in which Conciliationism requires belief revision. On this picture, the moral domain is somehow autonomous. If it is wrong, however, Conciliationism will still only require minimal reduction of confidence.
42. King [2012] argues that the right argument for disagreement-based skepticism will rely on principles like (A). See pp. 268–9. He's right that such principles are better suited for a skeptic's aim. He is wrong, however, to think that they are better suited for a skeptic who thinks disagreement is what entails skepticism. Such principles are too strong for her.
43. Notice that it wouldn't help to have a solution to global skepticism. That would keep NIRP from entailing global skepticism, but NIRP would still be unable to distinguish between distinct cases, and to capture what's threatening about evidence of ordinary sorts of error.
44. Christensen [2011] 15.
45. See Setiya [2012] 18.
46. Elga [2007].
47. Elga [2007] 495–6.
48. Elga [2007] 497.
49. Elga [2007] 496.
50. Setiya [2012] 20, fn. 14.
51. Setiya [2012] 20, fn. 14.
52. Christensen [2011] 4 makes this same point in response to a different objection.

53. Cf. Elga [ms].
54. Thanks to Hilary Kornblith for this example.
55. Lewis [1980].
56. Setiya presents these kinds of cases as part of his argument that Conciliationism entails moral skepticism (Setiya [2012] 14). He argues that disagreements about principles entails disagreements about cases. I'm not sure that's right and will come back to it below.
57. Interestingly, their reasons are increasingly more in line with consequentialist reasons; see Korsgaard [2011] on how the capacity for pain brings animals into the sphere of morally relevant.
58. See, for example, Hare [1979].
59. Sometimes, the fact that we agree on the cases won't help in these ways. Part of what makes this agreement about cases significant, even if there is disagreement about principles, is that we have some independent support for our judgments about the cases. If we believe what we do about cases only because that's what our principles entail, then our agreement about the cases will be cold comfort. How much we have to worry about those disagreements, however, will depend on just how fundamental the principles we derive them from are.
60. Shafer-Landau [2005] 219.
61. See Vavova [2014].
62. See Vavova [2014].
63. If something like this picture is right, it may help us respond to other worries about moral skepticism, such as those raised by Harman [1977].
64. For helpful comments and conversations, thanks to James Harold, Sophie Horowitz, Hilary Kornblith, Kathryn Lindeman, Alejandro Pérez Carballo, Kieran Setiya, Nishi Shah, and audience members at the Fordham Epistemology and Ethics workshop.

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