WILEY

Moral disagreement scepticism leveled

Jonathan Dixon[1,2]

[1]Department of Philosophy, University of Massachusetts Amherst, South College, 150 Hicks Way, Amherst, MA 01003, USA

[2]Department of Religion and Philosophy, High Point University, David Hayworth Hall, One University Parkway, High Point, NC 27265, USA

Correspondence

Jonathan Dixon, Department of Religion and Philosophy, High Point University, David Hayworth Hall, One University Parkway, High Point, NC 27265, USA.
Email: jdixon@highpoint.edu

Abstract

While many have argued that moral disagreement poses a challenge to moral knowledge, the precise nature of this challenge is controversial. Indeed, in the moral epistemology literature, there are many different versions of 'the' argument from moral disagreement to moral scepticism. This paper contributes to this vast literature on moral disagreement by arguing for two theses: 1. All (or nearly all) moral disagreement arguments share an underlying structure; and, 2. All moral disagreement arguments that satisfy this underlying structure cannot establish moral scepticism because this underlying structure leads to a previously unrecognized *reductio ad absurdum*. In short, I argue that this reductio argument (very likely) refutes all versions of the moral disagreement to moral scepticism argument in one fell swoop.

KEYWORDS

moral disagreement, moral epistemology, moral scepticism

One of the oldest and most discussed challenges to moral knowledge is the argument from moral disagreement to moral scepticism.[1] In its most general form, this argument reasons that moral knowledge is unattainable as long as there is (some kind of) disagreement about moral matters. But, as many authors have acknowledged, 'the' argument from moral disagreement to moral scepticism is a misnomer since there are many distinct arguments in this literature that attempt to use moral disagreements to establish moral scepticism (cf. Enoch (2009, p. 16; 2011, p. 185) and Tersman (2006, p. xiii)). Some versions argue that moral disagreements challenge the truth of moral claims. For instance, Mackie (1977) supports his error theory by arguing that the widespread moral disagreements between different cultures is 'more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions ... of objective values' (p. 37); and since knowledge requires truth, moral knowledge is impossible.[2] Other versions argue that moral disagreements challenge the accessibility of knowing moral facts. For in-

---

[1]See Gowans' (2000a) anthology for a historical overview, and see Campbell (2015) and Sayre-McCord (2017) for contemporary overviews.

[2]There is considerable controversy about the nature of Mackie's 'argument from relativity' and precisely how it supports his error theory. See Joyce (2018) for a discussion.

stance, Risberg and Tersman (2019) argue that the possibility of moral disagreement between ideal agents in ideal conditions shows that, even in the most favorable epistemic conditions, we lack the ability to know moral facts.[3]

Relatedly, other versions use moral disagreement to show that moral beliefs are not justified. For instance, many have argued that moral disagreements between epistemic peers (i.e., those who are about as equally well-positioned to acquire moral knowledge) defeats one's justification for their moral beliefs; and since knowledge requires undefeated justification, peer disagreement blocks moral knowledge.[4] While there is also a large literature on the threat that peer disagreement poses to knowledge in other (non-moral) domains, this paper focuses on the threat that moral disagreements pose for *moral* knowledge. And while this paper does discuss the general peer disagreement literature (see Section 2), focusing on moral disagreement arguments is dialectically well-founded because, as just explained, there are many additional and varied kinds of moral disagreement to moral scepticism arguments that do not rely on peer disagreement. So ironically, focusing on *moral* disagreements arguments allows this paper to have a wider scope and cover more argumentative ground than if it just focused on the threat posed by peer disagreement to moral (and non-moral) knowledge.[5]

But regardless of the precise way in which moral disagreements establish moral scepticism,[6] it appears that there are two necessary conditions for any moral disagreement argument. First, such arguments claim that there is moral disagreement (of some kind) over moral proposition(s) p; call this the *Moral Disagreement Thesis*. Second, such arguments claim that moral disagreement (of some kind) on p is (in some way) sufficient to establish moral scepticism on p is true; call this the *Sufficiency Thesis*.[7] In this paper I argue that any version of the moral disagreement argument that satisfies both these theses cannot establish moral scepticism because together these claims lead to a previously unrecognized *reductio ad absurdum*. Furthermore, I argue that because it is very plausible that all versions of the moral disagreement argument satisfy both these theses that this reductio argument (very likely) refutes all versions of this argument in one fell swoop.

Section 1 defines key terms and then presents a compelling version of the moral disagreement argument; Section 2 shows how this compelling version leads to a reductio; Section 3 defends this reductio argument from possible objections; Section 4 shows how any version of the moral disagreement argument that satisfies both the Moral Disagreement Thesis and the Sufficiency Thesis leads to a similar but more general reductio argument; and Section 5 explains why this general reductio argument (very likely) refutes all moral disagreement arguments.

SECTION 1

In this paper 'moral disagreement(s)' refers to any disagreement over moral propositions. And 'moral proposition(s)' refers to first-order moral claims like 'abortion is immoral' and 'you should not kick puppies.' It does not refer to second-order propositions like 'I know abortion is immoral' and 'moral relativism is false.' As such, these definitions only allow for disagreements within applied and normative ethics to count as *moral* disagreements, but exclude disagreements in metaethics from being *moral* disagreements. This terminology reflects the fact that moral disagreement sceptics (i.e., those who defend a moral disagreement to moral scepticism argument) are typically

---

[3]See Rowland (2017a) and Tolhurst (1987) for similar moral disagreement arguments that involve ideal conditions.

[4]See Fritz (2018), Fritz and McPherson (2019), McGrath (2008), Rowland (2017b), Sampson (2019), Setiya (2012), Vavova (2014), and Wedgwood (2010) for discussions of this version of the moral disagreement argument.

[5]Indeed, the general disagreement literature has focused largely on the sceptical implications for one family of views called Conciliationism, i.e., views which say that in the face of peer disagreement one should suspend belief or significantly reduce confidence in one's contested beliefs (e.g., see Christensen, 2009; Elga, 2010; Kornblith, 2013; Palmira, 2019). See Section 2.

[6]See Bennigson (1996), Leiter (2014), Loeb (1998), Mogensen (2017), and Wedgwood (2019) for additional versions of moral disagreement arguments. See Palmira and Stroud (2019) for a general discussion of the many additional kinds of disagreement arguments.

[7]While I believe that these conditions are also jointly sufficient for any moral disagreement argument, my arguments in this paper only rely on the necessity claims.

concerned with only establishing a first-order moral scepticism. But, as will be discussed in Section 2, many commentators have argued that there seems to be no good reason to believe that disagreement scepticism is limited to only disagreements about (first-order) moral propositions. Indeed, to foreshadow my arguments in Sections 3 and 4, moral disagreement arguments lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* precisely because they also impugn second-order epistemological claims about whether one knows a given moral proposition.

Additionally, throughout this paper 'sufficient to establish' is used to refer to any kind of reasoning that a moral disagreement argument might use to reach its (allegedly) *true* conclusion (e.g., *sound* deduction, cogent induction or inference to the best explanation with *true* conclusions, etc.), and to refer to any way in which moral disagreements might lead to moral scepticism (e.g., such disagreements challenge the truth of moral claims (i.e., Mackie, 1977), challenge the accessibility of moral facts (i.e., Risberg & Tersman, 2019), undermine one's justification to believe moral propositions (i.e., via peer disagreement), etc.). The purpose of this terminology is to allow many different versions of 'the' moral disagreement to moral scepticism argument to be referred to at once without having to specify 'the' type of reasoning or the precise way in which these arguments reach their conclusions. As such, rather than just focusing on one kind of moral disagreement to moral scepticism argument (e.g., via peer disagreement), this terminology allows my analysis of moral disagreement arguments to cover more and varied argumentative ground within the larger category of moral disagreement arguments.

And while there are many different versions of 'the' moral disagreement argument, not all versions are equally compelling. Consider the following formulation of this kind of argument, where 'C1' and 'C2' are different cultures and 'p' is a particular moral proposition:

Moral Disagreement between Cultures

A Disagreement between C1 and C2 about p is sufficient to establish that no one in C1 or C2 knows that p.
B There is disagreement between cultures C1 and C2 about p.
C Thus, no one in C1 or C2 knows that p. (A, B)

Many have argued that this and similar versions of the moral disagreement argument are unconvincing since, without knowing more about these cultures and the kind of disagreement between them, there are many convincing ways to resist this argument's conclusion. First, if C1 is full of people who exhibit some sort of cognitive shortcoming (i.e., they are irrational, uninformed, conceptually confused, etc.), then moral disagreement with C1 is intuitively not sufficient to establish moral scepticism about p. Second, if the disagreement between these cultures is one that will be resolved in short order (e.g., because these cultures are amenable), then at best this moral disagreement only provides a short-lived moral scepticism. Lastly, if these cultures only disagree about a few moral propositions, then their moral disagreements do not pose an extensive challenge to moral knowledge. For these (and other) reasons, it is generally agreed that this version of the moral disagreement argument (and others like it) does not pose a serious challenge to moral knowledge.[8]

A more compelling version of 'the' moral disagreement argument takes something like the following form, where 'p' is a particular moral proposition:

Moral Disagreement among Ethicists

1. Intractable disagreement among ethicists about p is sufficient to establish that ethicists do not know that p.
2. There is intractable disagreement among ethicists about p. (Empirically true premise)

---

[8]See Enoch (2009, pp. 21–29; 2011, pp. 187–196), Joyce (2018), and Tersman (2006, chap. 2) for the difficulties in determining when moral disagreements are a genuine threat to moral knowledge.

3. Thus, ethicists do not know that p. (1, 2)

Prima facie, this version of the argument is more plausible because it seems to avoid the problems of the previous version. First, ethicists are (presumably) cognitively competent moral agents (i.e., they are not irrational, uninformed, conceptually confused, etc.). Indeed, they are (presumably) in the best position to acquire moral knowledge since they spend their professional lives attempting to acquire it. But second, despite this prolonged study, ethicists seem to be perennially unable to resolve their moral disagreements. Indeed, Bourget and Chalmers (2014) found that there is no clear consensus among contemporary ethicists about the following perennial moral issue: which kind of normative ethical theory (i.e., Deontology, Consequentialism, or Virtue Ethics) is true. And, lastly, I take it as obviously true that ethicists disagree about a great many other moral propositions (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, etc.).[9] In short, this version of the moral disagreement argument poses a more serious challenge to moral knowledge.

SECTION 2

But despite the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument's prima facie plausibility, in this section I will argue that this argument leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*. This reductio builds upon two related and common challenges to moral disagreement arguments: they *overgeneralize* to non-moral propositions and are *epistemically self-defeating*.

Many commentators have challenged moral disagreement arguments on the grounds that they overgeneralize to non-moral propositions (i.e., non-first-order moral claims). For example, Sampson (2019) and Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 20) argue that moral disagreement arguments implausibly lead to a general philosophical scepticism for two reasons. First, like many (if not all) substantive moral propositions, there is a great amount of disagreement about many (if not all) substantive philosophical propositions (i.e., propositions that have philosophical content or are often discussed by philosophers). Second, there seems to be no good reason to think that disagreement scepticism is limited to only disagreements about (first-order) moral propositions. The first claim is obviously true to anyone familiar with academic philosophy, and the second claim is widely accepted.

Indeed, the general peer disagreement literature is predicated on the plausibility of disagreements undermining knowledge of many non-moral propositions. For instance, many in this literature hold that some version of Conciliationism is true, i.e., the family of views which roughly says that in the face of peer disagreement one should suspend belief or significantly reduce confidence in one's contested beliefs. Peer disagreements have this effect because such disagreements count as defeating higher-order-evidence, i.e., evidence which undercuts the reliability of one's reasoning ability. To illustrate, consider the now famous Mental Math example paraphrased from Christiansen (2007):

> You and a friend are out to dinner and decide to evenly split the bill with 20% tip. You both are about equally competent at this kind of elementary math and both of you honestly attempt to calculate the correct split-bill amount. But the bill comes and you calculate the amount to be $43 and your friend calculates $45. In this case nearly everyone[10] accepts that you both should become significantly less confident in your answer and/or should suspend belief about the correct split-bill amount. Consequently, neither of you (currently) knows the correct split-bill amount.

[9]Specifically, it is widely accepted that ethicists disagree about a great many *philosophical* moral propositions (cf. Leiter, 2014, pp. 141–142; Vavova, 2014, p. 323). Furthermore, these facts about the *actual distribution* of moral disagreements among ethicists allow me to set aside the issue about whether *potential* moral disagreements also have sceptical consequences (see Tersman, 2013).

[10]See Kelly (2005) and Titelbaum (2015) for exceptions.

More specifically, since you both are approximately well positioned to calculate the correct split-bill amount, such disagreements provide good evidence that one of you has made a mistake. But, since neither of you at the time of disagreement has any legitimate reason to discount the other's calculations, this evidence defeats your beliefs about the correct split-bill amount and, consequently, neither of you knows the correct split-bill amount.

For my purposes, this example persuasively demonstrates that disagreements over non-moral propositions can lead to scepticism for some non-moral propositions. Moreover, like Sampson and Shafer-Landau above, many in the peer disagreement literature also argue that Conciliationism leads to a general philosophical scepticism because philosophical peers are often perennially unable to resolve their disagreements (cf. Christensen, 2009; Kornblith, 2010, 2013; Palmira, 2019, and many others). Therefore, there appears to be no good reason to think that disagreement scepticism is limited to only disagreements about moral propositions. (But to again foreshadow my arguments in Sections 3 and 4, I argue that there is no good reason to exempt second-order epistemological claims about whether one knows a given moral proposition from disagreement scepticism).

However, one might object that *even if* moral disagreement arguments also apply to non-moral propositions, why is this problematic for the moral disagreement sceptic or her argument? For example, while both Sampson (2019) and Shafer-Landau (2003) take the overgeneralization challenge to show that many moral disagreement arguments are implausible, Leiter (2014) accepts that his moral disagreement argument applies to non-moral propositions but questions whether this implication is implausible. And, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are many in the peer disagreement literature that argue for a general philosophical scepticism via Conciliationism (esp. Kornblith, 2010, 2013). Thus, since the moral disagreement sceptic can plausibly accept that her argument applies to non-moral propositions, it is not yet clear why overgeneralization is a worrisome problem for her argument.

But, as many commentators have pointed out, accepting that moral disagreement arguments overgeneralize to a scepticism for non-moral propositions leads to the charge that such arguments are epistemically self-defeating. An argument is epistemically self-defeating iff at least one of this argument's components (i.e., premises, conclusions, or reasoning) applies to and epistemically defeats at least one such component. In the moral disagreement literature, discussions of the self-defeat challenge usually take the following form: if there is also disagreement about the non-moral *premises* of a moral disagreement argument, the sceptical implications of this argument will likely apply to these premises and epistemically defeat this argument. For example, Decker and Groll (2013, p. 157), Sampson (2019), and Shafer-Landau (2006, pp. 218–221; 2012, p. 328), argue that because the non-moral premises of moral disagreement arguments are also disagreed upon, such arguments are epistemically self-defeating.[11] Likewise, the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument above is vulnerable to this kind of self-defeat challenge: if premise 1 is a metaethical claim about which there is intractable disagreement among ethicists, then this premise applies to and epistemically defeats itself.[12]

However, this paper will focus on a different and often-overlooked version of the epistemic self-defeat challenge to moral disagreement arguments: if there is disagreement about the non-moral *conclusion* of a moral disagreement argument, then the sceptical consequences of this argument will apply to this conclusion and epistemically defeat this argument.[13] It appears that the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument above is also vulnerable to this overlooked kind of epistemic self-defeat: *if* there is also intractable disagreement among ethicists about whether the conclusion of this argument (i.e., ethicists do not know that p) is

---

[11]To be clear, while some of these authors do not *explicitly* explicate their self-defeat challenges as undermining the premises of moral disagreement arguments, a close reading of these passages shows they are describing this kind of self-defeat challenge.

[12]This kind of self-defeat challenge is also discussed in the general peer disagreement literature regarding Conciliationism. That is, because there is peer disagreement about Conciliationism, Conciliationism itself dictates that one should suspend belief or significantly reduce confidence about it, and so any argument with Conciliationism as a *premise* will likewise be epistemically self-defeating. See Christensen (2009, 2013), Decker (2014), Elga (2010), Kornblith (2013), Pittard (2015), and Weatherson (2013).

[13]To my knowledge, Enoch (2009, pp. 47–48; 2011, p. 216) is the only commentator to explicitly discuss this kind of self-defeat for moral disagreement arguments.

true, it follows from premise 1 that ethicists (including moral disagreement sceptics) also do not know the conclusion of this argument.

At first glance, this distinction between moral disagreement arguments epistemically self-defeating their own premises versus their own conclusion may not seem novel or significant. While I do not claim that this distinction is very novel, I do claim that this later kind of epistemic self-defeat is significant for two reasons. First, it avoids the general and frequently discussed *self-exempting* response to the epistemic self-defeat challenge in the general peer disagreement literature. Following Elga (2010) and Pittard (2015), the moral sceptic might argue that all fundamental principles must be self-exempting for them to not call for their own rejection (e.g., by providing logically inconsistent advice) or abandonment (e.g., by implying that they should not be rationally accepted), and since premise 1 plausibly embodies a fundamental epistemic principle, it is exempt from applying to and defeating itself.

Many find this kind of self-exempting response unconvincing and ad-hoc (e.g., Christensen, 2013; Decker, 2014; Sampson, 2019). What is important for my purposes is to notice that this self-exempting response cannot work against the often-overlooked version of the epistemic self-defeat challenge. The moral sceptic cannot plausibly argue that the *conclusion* of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument (i.e., ethicists do not know that p) is self-exempting because it embodies a fundamental principle without thereby *begging the question* against the moral non-sceptic. This conclusion is something the moral sceptic has to argue for. To illustrate, imagine that the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument was used to argue for the conclusion that 'ethicists do not know that abortion is permissible.' This is obviously not the kind of claim that the moral sceptic can say embodies a fundamental principle that is exempt from the sceptical implications of non-moral disagreements. And to make this exemption would beg the question against those ethicists who believe they know abortion is permissible. So, *even if* the self-exempting response has some merit against the former kind of self-defeat challenge (against the premises of a moral disagreement argument), it has no merit against the often-overlooked kind of self-defeat challenge (against the conclusion of a moral disagreement argument).[14]

Second, the latter type of self-defeat challenge is significant because it allows for my reductio argument. To see why this is the case, it will be helpful to more fully explain this self-defeat challenge by providing a formalized representation of it. To this end, if we use parentheses to indicate the conclusion of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument (i.e., ethicists do not know that p), this overlooked version of the self-defeat challenge can be formalized as:

The Self-defeat Challenge to 'Moral Disagreement among Ethicists'

4. There is intractable disagreement among ethicists about (ethicists do not know that p). (Empirically true premise)
5. Thus, ethicists do not know that (ethicists do not know that p). (1, 4)

Prima facie, premise 4 is empirically supported by the facts explained in Section 1 that there are many ethicists who believe some moral proposition p is true despite being aware that other ethicists believe ~p (e.g., see Bourget & Chalmers, 2014) and that ethicists are perennially unable to resolve their disagreements about a great many moral issues (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, etc.). And while this premise can be challenged in several ways (see Section 3), for ease of exposition let's assume for the time being that it is true.

However, following Barnett (2019), Christensen (2009, p. 763), and Matheson (2015, p. 149) in the general peer disagreement literature, one could argue that *even if* premise 4 is true, this self-defeat challenge is not very worrisome since it does *not* refute the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument. At best, this challenge only

---

[14]This is also an important point for the general peer disagreement literature where the focus of the self-defeat challenge has been on whether Conciliationism itself is self-defeating (see fn. 12). That is, even if Conciliationism is self-exempting and avoids the former kind of self-defeat (a la Elga (2010) and Pittard (2015)), this self-exemption cannot help in avoiding the later kind of self-defeat. Thanks to Hilary Kornblith for raising and pressing the importance of clarifying these points.

establishes that, by the moral disagreement sceptic's own reasoning, the conclusion of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument cannot be known. Indeed, the moral disagreement sceptic might again welcome this result by accepting that the conclusion of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is just another non-moral philosophical proposition that they and other ethicists do not know.

I agree that this self-defeat challenge does not *by itself* refute the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument. However, I argue that unless this self-defeat challenge can be blocked, the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is refuted by an additional argument. This additional argument assumes that the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is indeed sufficient to establish that its conclusion—ethicists do not know that p—is true. As such, if one accepts this conclusion because one understands and believes that this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, this argument should allow one, including ethicists, to know its conclusion. But this result contradicts what is established by the overlooked version of the self-defeat challenge—ethicists do not know this conclusion. And from this contradiction it follows that intractable disagreement among ethicists is *not* sufficient to establish moral scepticism (i.e., premise 1 is false). For clarity, this reductio argument can be formalized as:

Reductio of 'Moral disagreement among Ethicists'

6. If an ethicist E (a) learns of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument (premises 1–3), and (b) accepts its conclusion (ethicists do not know that p) because they understand and believe this argument is sufficient to establish that (ethicists do not know that p), and (c) this argument is in fact sufficient to establish that (ethicists do not know that p) is true, then they *know* that (ethicists do not know that p). (Premise)
7. An ethicist E satisfies (a) and (b), and (c) is true. (Premise)
8. Thus, E *knows* that (ethicists do not know that p). (6, 7)
9. Thus, premise 1 (i.e., intractable disagreement among ethicists about p is sufficient to establish that ethicists do not know that p) is false. (5, 8 Explosion)

In short, contra Barnett, Christensen, and Matheson, I claim that this reductio shows that *if* the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is epistemically self-defeating (via premises 4–5) then this argument fails to establish moral scepticism because its first premise is false (via premises 6–9).

SECTION 3

To establish this entailment, I will defend premises 6 and 7 (i.e., the only premises that are not logical consequences of previous premises) from possible objections. Additionally, since this entailment depends on the above self-defeat challenge, I will also defend premise 4 of this challenge from possible objections.

Beginning with premise 6, I claim that this premise is not something that anyone, including the moral disagreement sceptic (e.g., a defender of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument) can deny. Premise 6 roughly says that *if* the premises and reasoning of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument are *sufficient to establish* its conclusion, the conclusion is true,[15] and one is convinced of these claims, then they know its conclusion. Denying this premise is untenable because it follows from the following true principle:

---

[15]I should note that the claim that 'the conclusion is true' is redundant because, as explained in Section 1, 'sufficient to establish' is used to refer to any kind of reasoning that a moral disagreement argument might use to reach its (allegedly) *true* conclusion (e.g., *sound* deduction, cogent induction or inference to the best explanation with *true* conclusions, etc.). However, I will use this redundancy throughout the rest of the paper for added clarity and emphasis.

PRINCIPLE: If S learns of an argument A, and accepts its conclusions because S understands and believes this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, and A is in fact sufficient to establish that its conclusion is true, then S knows A's conclusion.

This principle can be understood in terms of 'sufficient justification': if some evidence E sufficiently justifies some true proposition q and one accepts this because they are convinced E is sufficient to justify q, then they know q. For instance, if consulting a reliable encyclopedia provides sufficient justification to form the true belief that the Battle of Britain was fought in 1940, and I am convinced I did this, then I know this proposition. Likewise, *if* disagreement among ethicists is sufficient justification for the truth of moral scepticism and I am convinced of this, then I know moral scepticism is true.

This principle can also be understood in terms of 'epistemic defeat': if a defeater D is sufficient to undermine belief in q, one's belief in q is defeated by D, and one accepts these claims because they are convinced that D is sufficient to defeat belief in q, then one knows that their belief in q is defeated. For instance, if consulting an unreliable encyclopedia is sufficient to defeat one's belief on when the Battle of Britain occurred, I did this, and I am convinced I did this, then I know that I do not know when it occurred. Likewise, if disagreement on moral proposition p is sufficient to defeat knowledge of p, one's knowledge of p is defeated by such disagreement, and I am convinced that such disagreement is sufficient to defeat knowledge of p, then I know that no one knows that p. So, as premise 6 says, *if* the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion as true, then provided one accepts this because they find this argument convincing, it follows that this argument provides sufficient grounds (via justification or defeat) to know its conclusion.

On might object to PRINCIPLE (and premise 6) on the grounds that it is missing a defeater clause and without such a clause it is possible for its antecedent to be true while its consequent false. For instance, suppose that I believe a true conclusion p on the basis of a flawless argument, but I have been credibly (but falsely) told that I have been slipped a reasoning-distorting pill. Contra PRINCIPLE, many hold that this high-order evidence (i.e., evidence about the reliability of one's reasoning ability) blocks one's knowledge of p (e.g., Christensen (2010)) despite being convinced by a flawless argument for p.

I accept that such higher-order evidence would defeat one's knowledge of p, but this is not a problem for my use of this principle for three reasons. First, the relevant defeater clause can be added to PRINCIPLE without any loss to its plausibility. With this clause, PRINCIPLE now says: If S learns of an argument A, and accepts its conclusions because S understands and believes this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, and A is sufficient to establish that its conclusion is true, then, *absent defeaters*, S know A's conclusion. Second, because most epistemic principles have to be, at least implicitly, understood to have such a defeater clause, it is very implausible to deny PRINCIPLE (or premise 6) on these grounds. Indeed, only a complete sceptic about our ability to gain knowledge from arguments (i.e., via reasoning and inference) would deny that we are able to gain knowledge in the way PRINCIPLE suggests (i.e., learning a true conclusion by competently following and being convinced by a(n) (allegedly) flawless argument). Lastly and relatedly, unless the moral disagreement sceptic accepts that her own argument never renders knowledge of its conclusion, the moral disagreement sceptic herself has to accept PRINCIPLE (or something very similar). Such high-order defeating evidence affects *all* arguments, including both my reductio argument and any version of a moral disagreement argument. Thus, such higher-order defeat cannot be used categorically by the moral sceptic to deny PRINCIPLE and block my reductio since this would also likewise affect her own moral disagreement argument. For all of these reasons, I will henceforth omit this defeater clause in this paper, but it should be implicitly understood to be a part of PRINCIPLE (and the particular premises that embody it (e.g., premise 6 and premise VI below)).[16]

---

[16]And the same is true of other similar reasoning distorting kinds of higher-order defeaters (e.g., hypoxia cases). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

Denying premise 7 is also untenable because it just assumes that there is at least one ethicist who is convinced by the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument and that this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion. Indeed, moral disagreement sceptics *themselves* satisfy this premise because they are convinced by and espouse this argument.[17] Thus, there is no plausible way for the moral disagreement sceptic to deny premises 6 or 7.

But since my reductio argument depends on the overlooked version of the self-defeat challenge, one could also deny premise 4 to undermine my reductio argument. As mentioned in Section 2, denying premise 4 on empirical grounds is prima facie implausible since such disagreements do occur (again, see Bourget and Chalmers (2014)) and occur often (e.g., on abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, etc.). Additionally, denying this premise on empirical grounds is precarious at best for the moral disagreement sceptic. Because premise 2 of the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument is also an empirical premise, to avoid the possibility of undermining the empirical support for her own argument the moral disagreement sceptic will need some way to *differentiate* the kind of moral disagreement in premise 2 from the kind in premise 4. And it is not obvious how this can be accomplished non-arbitrarily.

However, to this end, another way to deny premise 4 is on normative grounds. To deny a premise on normative grounds is to argue that *even if* this claim is empirically true, this premise can be disregarded because it does not have the relevant bearing on the issues at hand. For example, in the abortion debate, one might argue that even if a fetus only becomes viable after a certain number of weeks of pregnancy, this fact is not relevant for determining the permissibility of abortion because personhood begins at conception. Regarding premise 4, a moral disagreement sceptic might argue that while the moral disagreements in premise 4 do occur, such disagreements can be disregarded because they are epistemically inappropriate or irrational.[18]

But before examining an example and getting into the details of this kind of objection to premise 4, I should note at the outset that any normative denial of premise 4 faces several difficulties which make denying premise 4 on these grounds implausible. Denying premise 4 on normative grounds basically amounts to claiming that certain non-moral propositions (i.e., premise 3) are somehow *exempt* from the sceptical consequences of disagreement on them (per the self-defeat challenge). But, as argued above, there seems to be no good justification for such exemptions for two reasons. First, to deny premise 4 on normative grounds is tantamount to claiming that ethicists are making some cognitive mistake when they continue to disagree about knowing moral propositions after learning about disagreement on these propositions. But, as mentioned Section 1, disagreements between ethicists are presumably not the result of some cognitive shortcoming. Second, such an exemption for premise 3 seems ad-hoc since, as argued in Section 2, there is no good reason to think that disagreement scepticism is limited to only disagreements about moral propositions. For instance, Conciliationism does not exempt such epistemological claims from its sceptical implications when ethical peers disagree on whether they know a certain moral (or non-moral) proposition.

However, despite these difficulties, there are additional reasons why the moral disagreement sceptic cannot deny premise 4. To see these reasons, it will be instructive to consider the following way to normatively challenge this premise: one might argue that disagreements over whether one continues to know that p (premise 4) are epistemically inappropriate or irrational *after* learning that ethicists disagree on p (premise 2). That is, even if a large number of ethicists continue to believe p *after* learning of the disagreement among ethicists on p, since the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument establishes that ethicists do not know p, such ethicists are not justified in *continuing* to believe p. As such, this continued moral disagreement in premise 4 (i.e., about whether ethicists do

[17]One might object that the Pyrrhonian moral sceptic can deny this premise since she does not assent to or believe any moral propositions, nor the claim that moral scepticism is true (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 10). While I believe this objection and Pyrrhonianism in general are implausible (cf. Gowans, 2000b, p. 10), I will set these issues aside and direct my arguments in this paper only to the Academic moral sceptic who assents to or believes that moral disagreement arguments are sufficient to establish moral scepticism (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 11). But, if appealing to Pyrrhonian moral scepticism is the only way for the moral disagreement sceptic to avoid my reductio arguments, then this, I claim, is still a significant result.

[18]Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I clearly explain how normative grounds can be pertinent to the assessment of empirical claims.

not know that p) carries no epistemic weight and is thus exempt from the sceptical consequences of disagreement on such epistemological claims.

This normative objection to premise 4 is misguided because it assumes that the disagreements embodied in premise 4 always take place *after* learning of the disagreement embodied in premise 2 (i.e., disagreements over whether one *continues* to know that p (premise 4), *after* learning that ethicists disagree on p (premise 2)). But this is not true. Indeed, these disagreements *co-occur* when the following conditions are met: those ethicists who disagree about p also each, respectively, believe they know or do not know that p *before* they recognize their disagreement on p. To illustrate, in the case where p is Utilitarianism (U), *before* they recognize their disagreement on U, Ethicist-1 (E1) believes they know that U and Ethicist-2 (E2) believes they know that ~U (e.g., because E2 is a Kantian). These beliefs entail that: E1 believes they know ~U is false and E2 believes they know that U is false. And if we assume knowledge is *factive* (i.e., you cannot know something that is false), these beliefs entail that: E1 believes no one knows that ~U and E2 believes that no one knows that U. So, *when* these ethicists recognize their disagreement on U, E1 believes E2 does not know that ~U and E2 believes that E1 does not know that U. Thus, when such ethicists disagree on U, there is one ethicist (E2) who believes the other does not know that U and another (E1) who disagrees about this. Thus, when such ethicists disagree on U (premise 2), they also disagree on ethicists not knowing that U (premise 4).

Furthermore, I argue that this Utilitarian example shows that denying premise 4 on either empirical or normative grounds is not a viable way to block my reductio argument because when the above conditions are met, premise 4 is a *logical consequence* of premise 2. In other words, what this above Utilitarian example shows is that there is no plausible way to differentiate or exempt the moral disagreements in premise 4 from the moral disagreements in premise 2 because when certain conditions are met, *if* premise 2 is empirically true (as the moral sceptic accepts), then so is premise 4. Therefore, there is no plausible way for the moral disagreement sceptic to deny premise 4 on either empirical or normative grounds.

Indeed, when the above conditions are met, this entailment between premise 2 and 4 is additionally significant and novel to the moral disagreement literature because it shows that the overlooked version of the epistemic self-defeat challenge (i.e., when moral disagreement arguments undermine their own conclusion) is *unavoidable* for the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument. As long as there is *at least one* case where ethicists believe they know a moral proposition (e.g., Utilitarianism) *before* they learn another ethicist intractably disagrees, then premise 2 will entail premise 4 in these cases and the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument will be epistemically self-defeating. And this paves the way for my reductio argument to refute the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument.

Thus, since the moral disagreement sceptic cannot deny the only three premises that the above reductio depends on (i.e., premises 6, 7, and 4), this reductio argument refutes the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists argument.

SECTION 4

In this section I will demonstrate how the above reductio argument can be generalized to any moral disagreement argument that satisfies the *Moral Disagreement Thesis*—there is moral disagreement (of some kind) over moral proposition(s) p; and the *Sufficiency Thesis*—moral disagreement (of some kind) on p is (in some way) sufficient to establish moral scepticism on p is true. I will first explain this reductio argument and then, briefly defend it from possible objections.

To begin, if we assume for the time being that all moral disagreement arguments satisfy both the Moral Disagreement Thesis and the Sufficiency Thesis, then all moral disagreement arguments can be formalized as having *something like* the following argumentative structure, where 'p' is some particular moral proposition:

All Moral Disagreement Arguments

I   Disagreement of some kind K about p among or between the members of group(s) G is sufficient to establish that no one in G knows that p. (Sufficiency Thesis)

II   There is disagreement of kind K about p in G. (Moral Disagreement Thesis)

III   Thus, no one in G knows that p. (I, II)

Variable K is meant to stand for any kind of disagreement (e.g., mere disagreement; wide-ranging disagreement; deep disagreement; radical disagreement; persistent and pervasive disagreement; irresolvable disagreement; undecidable disagreement; intractable disagreement; peer disagreement; etc.),[19] and group G can be filled in with any moral agents (e.g., different cultures, ethicists, etc.). These variables allow for many moral disagreement arguments to be captured by this general argumentative structure. For example, it is easy to see that both the Moral Disagreement between Cultures and the Moral Disagreement among Ethicists arguments above are instantiations of this structure.[20]

My reductio of this structure, like the previous reductio argument, also builds upon the overlooked version of the epistemic self-defeat challenge. This argument structure is also vulnerable to this challenge because it seems that premise I applies to and epistemically defeats this argument's conclusion. If we use parentheses to indicate the conclusion of this argument (i.e., no one in G knows that p), this self-defeat challenge can be formalized as:

The Self-defeat Challenge to 'All Moral Disagreement Arguments'

IV   There is disagreement of kind K in G about (no one in G knows that p). (Empirical Premise)

V   Thus, no one in G knows that (no one in G knows that p). (I, IV)

And, again, while this self-defeat challenge does not *by itself* refute All Moral Disagreement Arguments, I argue that unless this self-defeat challenge can be blocked, All Moral Disagreement Arguments is refuted by an additional reductio argument.

Like my previous reductio argument, this version also assumes that All Moral Disagreement Arguments is indeed sufficient to establish that its conclusion is true. As such, if one accepts this conclusion because one understands and believes that this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, this argument allows one to know its conclusion. But this result contradicts what is established by the self-defeat challenge—that no one knows this conclusion. And from this contradiction it follows that disagreement, of any kind, is not sufficient to establish moral scepticism (i.e., premise I is false). For clarity, this reductio argument can be formalized as:

Reductio of 'All Moral Disagreement Arguments'

VI   If at least one member in G (a) learns of a moral disagreement to moral scepticism argument (premises I-III), and (b) accepts its conclusion (no one in G knows that p) because they understand and believe this argument is sufficient to establish that (no one in G knows that p), and (c) this argument is in fact sufficient to establish that (no one in G knows that p) is true, then they *know* that (no one in G knows that p)). (Premise)

VII   At least one member in G satisfies (a) and (b), and (c) is true. (Premise)

---

[19]These are examples of the different words that commentators have used to describe moral disagreements. While some of these might be equivalent, I want to allow for the possibility that there are many different kinds of moral disagreement that pose a challenge to moral knowledge.

[20]See Enoch (2009, 2011, chap. 8) for examples of other formalized moral disagreement arguments that are captured by this argumentative structure.

VIII Thus, at least one member in G *knows* that (no one in G knows that p). (VI, VII)

IX   Thus, premise I (i.e., the Sufficiency Thesis) is false. (V, VIII Explosion)

Furthermore, like my previous reductio argument, I claim that this reductio argument shows that *if* All Moral Disagreement Arguments is epistemically self-defeating (via premises IV-V) then this argument fails because its first premise is false (via premises VI-IX). And like my previous reductio argument, to establish this entailment I will defend premises VI, VII, and IV (i.e., the only premises that are not logical consequences of previous premises) from possible objections.

Fortunately, my defense of the previous reductio argument applies *mutatis mutandis* to the above reductio argument. To briefly reiterate, like premise 6, premise VI is not something anyone, including the moral disagreement sceptic (e.g., a defender of All Moral Disagreement Arguments), can deny. This premise essentially says that *if* the premises and reasoning of All Moral Disagreement Arguments are *sufficient to establish* its conclusion, its conclusion is true, and one is convinced that this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, then they know its conclusion. Again, denying this claim is untenable because it follows from the following true principle:

> **PRINCIPLE**: If S learns of an argument A, and accepts its conclusions because S understands and believes this argument is sufficient to establish its conclusion, and A is in fact sufficient to establish that its conclusion is true, then S knows A's conclusion (e.g., the Battle of Britain examples).

And like premise 7, premise VII is an assumption that the moral disagreement sceptic also cannot deny because they *themselves* satisfy this premise.[21]

And, like premise 4, premise IV is also not something the moral sceptic can plausibly deny on empirical or normative grounds since there seems to be no good justification to *exempt* certain non-moral propositions (i.e., premise III) from the sceptical consequences of moral disagreement on them. Additionally, when certain conditions are met, premise IV is a logical consequence of premise II. As explained in the previous section, this entailment occurs when the following conditions are met: those who disagree about p also each, respectively, believe they know or do not know that p *before* they recognize their moral disagreement. In brief, if Group-1 (G1) believes they know p and Group-2 (G2) believes they know ~p, then when G1 and G2 discover their moral disagreement of kind K on p (premise II) they are also disagreeing on whether each other knows that p (premise IV). Lastly, when the above conditions are met, this entailment is additionally significant and novel to the moral disagreement literature because it shows that the overlooked version of the epistemic self-defeat challenge is *unavoidable* for All Moral Disagreement Arguments. There only needs to *one* case where the disagreement in premise II entails premise IV, in the way described above, for All Moral Disagreement Arguments to be epistemically self-defeating. And this unavoidable entailment paves the way for my reductio argument to refute All Moral Disagreement Arguments.

Thus, since the moral disagreement sceptic cannot deny the only three premises that the above reductio depends on (i.e., premises VI, VII, and IV), this reductio refutes All Moral Disagreement Arguments.

SECTION 5

My overall argument in the last section was a conditional: *if* all moral disagreement arguments satisfy both the Moral Disagreement Thesis and the Sufficiency Thesis, then the above reductio follows. And it seems obviously true that these theses are necessary conditions for any moral disagreement argument. Furthermore, because it seems obviously true that all moral disagreement arguments satisfy these theses, the burden of proof is on the moral disagreement sceptic to provide a moral disagreement argument that does not satisfy these (or similar)

---

[21]But, again, see fn. 17.

theses. Either way, my reductio argument refutes those moral disagreement arguments that do satisfy the Moral Disagreement Thesis and the Sufficiency Thesis which, I claim, is still a significant result.

In conclusion, despite being one of the oldest and most discussed arguments for moral scepticism, 'the' argument from moral disagreement to moral scepticism poses no problem for moral knowledge.

ORCID

Jonathan Dixon https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4040-7289

REFERENCES

Barnett, Z. (2019). Philosophy without belief. *Mind*, *128*(509), 109–138. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzw076

Bennigson, T. (1996). Irresolvable disagreement and the case against moral realism. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, *34*(4), 411–437. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1996.tb00800.x

Bourget, D., & Chalmers, D. (2014). What do philosophers believe? *Philosophical Studies*, *170*(3), 465–500. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0259-7

Campbell, R. (2015). Moral epistemology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/moral-epistemology/

Christensen, D. (2007). Epistemology of disagreement: The good news. *Philosophical Review*, *116*, 187–218. https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2006-035

Christensen, D. (2009). Disagreement as evidence: The epistemology of controversy. *Philosophy Compass*, *4*(5), 756–767. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00237.x

Christensen, D. (2010). Higher-order evidence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *81*(1), 185–215.

Christensen, D. (2013). Epistemic modesty defended. In J. Lackey & D. Christensen (Eds.), *The epistemology of disagreement: New essays* (pp. 77–97). Oxford University Press.

Decker, J. (2014). Conciliationism and Self-incrimination. *Erkenntnis*, *79*, 1099–1134.

Decker, J., & Groll, D. (2013). On the (in)significance of moral disagreement for moral knowledge. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics* (Vol. *8*, pp. 140–167). Oxford University Press.

Elga, A. (2010). How to disagree about how to disagree. In R. Feldman & T. Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 175–186). Oxford University Press.

Enoch, D. (2009). How is moral disagreement a problem for realism? *The Journal of Ethics*, *13*, 15–50. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-008-9041-z

Enoch, D. (2011). *Taking morality seriously: A defense of robust realism*. Oxford University Press.

Fritz, J. (2018). Conciliationism and moral spinelessness. *Episteme*, *15*(1), 101–118.

Fritz, J., & McPherson, T. (2019). Moral steadfastness and meta-ethics. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *56*(1), 43–55.

Gowans, C. (Ed.). (2000a). *Moral disagreements: Classic and contemporary readings*. Routledge.

Gowans, C. (2000b). Introduction. In C. Gowans (Ed.), *Moral disagreements: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 1–43). Routledge.

Joyce, R. (2018). Arguments from moral disagreement to moral skepticism. In D. Machuca (Ed.), *Moral skepticism: New essays* (pp. 141–162). Routledge.

Kelly, T. (2005). The epistemic significance of disagreement. In T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford studies in epistemology* (Vol. *1*, pp. 167–196). Oxford University Press.

Kornblith, H. (2010). Belief in the face of controversy. In R. Feldman & T. Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 29–52). Oxford University Press.

Kornblith, H. (2013). Is philosophical knowledge possible? In D. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and skepticism* (pp. 260–276). Routledge.

Leiter, B. (2014). Moral skepticism and moral disagreement in Nietzsche. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics* (Vol. *9*, pp. 126–149). Oxford University Press.

Loeb, D. (1998). Moral realism and the argument from disagreement. *Philosophical Studies*, *90*(3), 281–303.

Mackie, J. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*. Penguin Books.

Matheson, J. (2015). Are conciliatory views of disagreement self-defeating? *Social Epistemology*, *29*(2), 145–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2014.907833

McGrath, S. (2008). Moral disagreement and moral expertise. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics* (Vol. *3*, pp. 87–108). Oxford University Press.

Mogensen, A. (2017). Disagreement in moral intuitions as defeaters. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *67*(267), 282–302.

Palmira, M. (2019). How to solve the puzzle of peer disagreement. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *56*(1), 83–95.

Palmira, M., & Stroud, S. (2019). The nature and implications of disagreement. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *56*(1), ii–iv.

Pittard, J. (2015). Resolute conciliationism. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *65*(260), 442–463. https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqv022

Risberg, O., & Tersman, F. (2019). A new route from moral disagreement to moral skepticism. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, *5*(2), 189–207. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2019.3

Rowland, R. (2017a). The significance of significant fundamental moral disagreement. *Nous*, *51*(4), 802–831.

Rowland, R. (2017b). The epistemology of moral disagreement. *Philosophy Compass*, *12*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12398

Sampson, E. (2019). The self-undermining arguments from disagreement. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics* (Vol. *14*, pp. 23–46). Oxford University Press.

Sayre-McCord, G. (2017, Fall). Moral realism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/moral-realism/

Setiya, K. (2012). *Knowing right from wrong*. Oxford University Press.

Shafer-Landau, R. (2003). *Moral realism: A defense*. Oxford University Press.

Shafer-Landau, R. (2006). Ethics as philosophy: A defense of ethical nonnaturalism. In T. Horgan & M. Timmons (Eds.), *Metaethics after Moore* (pp. 209–232). Oxford University Press.

Shafer-Landau, R. (2012). *The fundamentals of ethics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2006). *Moral skepticisms*. Oxford University Press.

Tersman, F. (2006). *Moral disagreement*. Cambridge University Press.

Tersman, F. (2013). Moral disagreement: Actual vs. possible. In D. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and skepticism* (pp. 90–108). Routledge.

Titelbaum, M. (2015). Rationality's fixed point (or. in defense of right reason). In T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Oxford studies in epistemology* (Vol. *5*, pp. 253–294). Oxford University Press.

Tolhurst, W. (1987). The argument from moral disagreement. *Ethics*, *97*(3), 610–621. https://doi.org/10.1086/292869

Vavova, K. (2014). Moral disagreement and moral skepticism. *Philosophical Perspectives*, *28*(1), 302–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12049

Weatherson, B. (2013). Disagreements, philosophical and otherwise. In J. Lackey & D. Christensen (Eds.), *The epistemology of disagreement: New essays* (pp. 54–73). Oxford University Press.

Wedgwood, R. (2010). The moral evil demons. In R. Feldman & T. Warfield (Eds.), *Disagreement* (pp. 216–246). Oxford University Press.

Wedgwood, R. (2019). Moral disagreement and inexcusable irrationality. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *56*(1), 97–108.