

# The Argument from Disagreement to Moral Skepticism: A “Worldview” Reply<sup>1</sup>

By Christopher W. Love

**ABSTRACT:** This essay begins with the assumption that many of our moral disputes have deeper roots in disagreement over worldview propositions. If this is true, and if there is a fact of the matter about worldview propositions, such that one could know the truth of at least some of them, then this makes it possible for one to maintain one’s moral beliefs, even despite the persistent, pervasive disagreements so common today. I argue that this holds true even when those debates include supposed peers and when the worldview propositions themselves are highly disputed.

For decades, Christian apologists and philosophers have used worldview analyses to make sense of social trends and to defend the explanatory power of the Christian faith. In this essay, I seek to push this analysis a little bit further. I engage the fields of ethics and epistemology, in response to a challenge at the intersection of those fields. Call this challenge the “argument from disagreement to moral skepticism.” Put briefly, it claims that moral disagreement—a phenomenon all-too common in our world—gives us reason to doubt one of two things: It either calls into question the *existence* of moral facts (a metaphysical conclusion) or else suggests that even if such facts exist, we could not *know* them as facts (an epistemological conclusion).<sup>2</sup> I shall limit my response in this paper to the epistemic challenge. This argument for moral skepticism has important implications; it threatens to introduce an unhelpful ambivalence toward moral issues. If confidence undergirds action and the skeptical argument threatens to *remove* such confidence, and in a domain—ethics—that matters profoundly for personal and social wellbeing, then we ought to welcome insights that might defeat the skeptical argument. I believe worldview considerations offer such insight. As I will argue, they enable one to maintain one’s moral beliefs, at least in

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<sup>1</sup> A published version of this article appeared in *Philosophia Christi* 20:2 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent survey of ways philosophers have used disagreement to motivate moral skepticism, see Richard Joyce, “Arguments from Moral Disagreement to Moral Skepticism,” in *Moral Skepticism: New Essays*, ed. Machuca (Milton: Routledge, 2017). A similar problem arises in non-moral cases of disagreement and is advanced by proponents of the “equal weight view.” See, e.g., Adam Elga’s “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Nous* 41 (2007).

theory, despite ongoing disagreement. If our ethical beliefs have roots in worldview matters and we can know (at least some) of the latter, this suggests we can also know the former.<sup>3</sup>

My essay takes the form of an extended thought experiment. Suppose many of our moral disagreements stem, at bottom, from prior disagreement about worldview propositions. By worldview propositions, I mean “deep” descriptive propositions (or beliefs) of the sort on which we base our lives.<sup>4</sup> I will give examples of such propositions and their resulting disagreement in the next section. For now, I simply ask: If my assumption is true, what difference would this make (if any) for the success of the skeptical argument from disagreement?

Before I sharpen this question further, we should examine the three problems (or “three p’s”) that make disagreement so troubling. The first is disagreements’ *persistence*.<sup>5</sup> That many of our disputes seem unending may suggest that no answer exists to settle the dispute.

The second troubling feature of moral disagreement is its *pervasiveness*.<sup>6</sup> This comes in two forms. First, we disagree about a large *number* of moral propositions. As Setiya notes, “The danger [with calling for agnosticism] is that, in ethics, disagreement with peers is more or less routine.” As such, the argument from disagreement provides “the basis for a devastating

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<sup>3</sup> Worldview claims are, of course, also highly disputed. I engage this problem from Section 2.2 onward. For a series of cutting-edge essays on the epistemic status of religious disagreement, see *Philosophia Christi* 20:1 (2018).

<sup>4</sup> My suggestion that such propositions are “descriptive” in nature contrasts with Kieran Setiya’s view in *Knowing Right from Wrong* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 13, in which two people *agree* about some non-moral facts but disagree about whether they imply a moral fact. Not only do I want to suggest that we do not agree about the non-moral facts, but I think that these non-moral facts are especially deep, lying at the worldview level.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah McGrath uses this term in “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (3) (Oxford University Press, 2008), 87. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6, speaks instead of “interminability.” As McIntyre says, “the most striking feature of [our moral] debates is their interminable character”—not just that they “go on and on” but that “There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”

<sup>6</sup> See Bryan Frances and Jonathan Matheson, “Disagreement,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/disagreement>, especially their section “Disagreement by the Numbers.” See also Hilary Kornblith’s “Is Philosophical Knowledge Possible?” in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2013), for an instance of skepticism based on endless disagreement.

skepticism.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, in addition to the number of beliefs about which we disagree, we also face a problem of *distribution*. Were there only a small number of dissenting voices, we might not have a problem; however, as McGrath notes, “it is the fact that there is a substantial division of opinion with respect to controversial moral questions that undermines the possibility of knowing the answers to those questions.”<sup>8</sup>

The third and most troubling feature is the problem of *peer* disagreement.<sup>9</sup> It is one thing when, e.g., a child and an adult disagree about some ethical fact, quite another when two thoughtful and well-informed adults disagree. Lackey summarizes two common criteria for peerhood:

**Evidential equality:** A and B are evidential equals relative to the question whether *p* when A and B are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.

**Cognitive equality:** A and B are cognitive equals relative to the question whether *p* when A and B are equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*.<sup>10</sup>

Not all disagreements involve peers. Yet, insofar as some do, we might be tempted toward agnosticism about our beliefs in such cases.

We can now sharpen the thought experiment: If many of our moral disagreements indeed stem from differences of belief about worldview propositions, would this matter for the success of

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<sup>7</sup> Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise,” 95.

Sanford Goldberg speaks of “entrenched” and “widespread” disagreements, which overlap substantially with my terms “persistent” and “pervasive,” though Goldberg’s use of entrenched has additional nuance. See “Defending Philosophy in the Face of Systematic Disagreement,” in *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Machuca (New York: Routledge, 2013), 278.

<sup>9</sup> There are at least two basic conceptions of peerhood—one that focuses on the cognitive and evidential equality between people, the other on their equal probability of getting things right. See below for greater detail. This essay employs the first conception, which Chad Bogosian and Paul Copan call “intellectual peers” in “The Epistemology of Religious Disagreement: An Introduction,” *Philosophia Christi*, 20:1 (2018), 208.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Lackey, “A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance,” in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Haddock, Millar, and Pritchard (Oxford University Press, 2010), 302. Adam Elga provides an alternative definition in “Reflection and Disagreement.” His basic view states “conditional on a disagreement arising, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken,” 490. For a critique of Elga’s criterion, see Lackey’s footnote 17.

the skeptical argument from disagreement? Would it shed light on the problems of persistence, pervasiveness and peer disagreement?

I offer a tentative yes. In some, though not all, cases, our thought experiment would enable people to know the truth of their moral beliefs, despite ongoing disagreement.<sup>11</sup> I develop this argument in Part 2, after laying further groundwork in Part 1. Along the way, I engage the “three p’s,” suggesting that our assumption about worldview beliefs either eliminates or else reduces their difficulty. I conclude, in Part 3, by considering the implications of my experiment for ethical debates in the public square.

### 1.1 – The Basic Idea

In this section, I will sketch the kind of picture I have in mind when I speak of worldview disagreement and the role it plays in our ethical controversies. The following quote from a noted textbook on deductive logic provides a helpful opener:

In general, background assumptions about the range of relevant circumstances are not made an explicit part of everyday reasoning, and this can give rise to disagreements about the reasoning’s validity. People with different assumptions may come up with very different assessments about the validity of some explicit piece of reasoning. In such cases, it is often helpful to articulate general facts about the presupposed circumstances. *By making these explicit, we can often identify the source of disagreement.*<sup>12</sup>

The authors illustrate this claim with an example from geometry. We might infer that some unknown object must be a dodecahedron, given the fact that it is neither a cube nor a tetrahedron. This inference is valid, provided that there are only three kinds of objects in our domain of discourse, and given our knowledge that two of them do not apply in the present case. Yet, suppose you did *not* share these assumptions. Suppose you thought that our domain of discourse contained

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<sup>11</sup> This follows Lackey’s lead in, “A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance,” 305, by suggesting that we ought not respond to all cases of peer disagreement in the same manner. In the language of contemporary epistemology, my position allows for “steadfastness” but only in certain circumstances.

<sup>12</sup> Dave Barker-Plummer & Jon Barwise & John Etchemendy, *Language Proof and Logic* (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2011), 290.

*four* possible kinds of objects, or else that one of more of our three kinds is something *other than* a cube, a tetrahedron or a dodecahedron. In either case, you would reject the inference that our unknown object must be a dodecahedron, and rightly so.

Suppose an identical phenomenon often characterizes our ethical disagreements, except that, in the latter case, the background assumptions consist of worldview propositions. Earlier, I defined these propositions as the sort of ultimate beliefs on which we base our lives. Yet what *actual* propositions might these be?

Examples include our answers to the following questions:

- 1) Whether God exists
- 2) What this God, if existing, is like
- 3) Whether God has communicated with human beings
- 4) Which record, if any, preserves that communication, and how it is to be interpreted
- 5) Whether God loves us and has purposes for our lives
- 6) Whether we have a nature and/or a telos (and if so, what) or are instead self-constituting
- 7) Whether a certain set of practices or ethical injunctions corresponds with our flourishing, that is, with the “good life,” understood in a pre-moral sense<sup>13</sup>
- 8) Whether we have some amount of free will or are (solely) directed by chemical, biological and social factors
- 9) Whether life continues after the death of our bodies, and what that life is like
- 10) Who among us knows most accurately about our condition
- 11) Whether we can “know” anything at all

This is not a complete list, nor can I offer a precise formula for determining what does or does not make the list. I can simply say that each answer would seem to have implications—practical and even ethical—for how we live our lives. I will defend this latter claim in my next section.

The following examples illustrate paradigm ethical disagreements.

**Euthanasia:** Two colleagues disagree over the moral status of euthanasia. For a while, they exchange arguments according to a public-reasons-style debate. Jack cites the suffering and indignity of life in a terminally-ill state to justify euthanasia, while Jim highlights possible

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<sup>13</sup> By “flourishing,” I have in mind something like “greatest happiness” or “well-being,” on both a personal and social level.

unintended consequences, e.g., a growing pressure on the elderly to end their lives, to avoid burdening their families. Soon, however, it becomes clear that Jack and Jim have different ultimate commitments. Jack, an atheist, believes our existence is a product of chance. Our life is *our* life; we “owe” no one for it, nor does it serve any purpose beyond what we give it. Meanwhile, Jim, a theist, sees us as the handiwork of an all-knowing Creator, who wills our good and who alone sees the full picture. We were each made for purposes *beyond* our choosing, and euthanasia might thwart those purposes. Thus, though Jack and Jim may agree about some particulars—e.g., the general badness of pain—their differing worldview commitments keep them from reaching overall agreement.

Take another case.

**Sexual Ethics:** Mary and Emma disagree on a wide range of issues pertaining to human sexuality. Both identify as Christians, but they disagree over biblical historicity. Mary holds the Bible to be a trustworthy way by which God communicated his purposes to people; she therefore feels compelled to adopt its teachings on sexual (and other) practices, when responsibly interpreted. Emma, though, feels no such compulsion; she sees the Bible as a thoroughly human document, leaving questions of sexual practice up for debate. Although Mary might stand to persuade Emma in a public-reasons-style debate, Emma’s chances are less good with Mary, for Mary considers the matter “out of human hands.”

These scenarios, though distinct, share common features. Both involve persistent disagreement about the moral status of a given issue. In each case, this disagreement stems, at bottom, from differing worldview commitments about, e.g., whether God exists; whether we are creatures or felicitous accidents; or whether a given religious text contains a trustworthy record of

divine communication, whereby we stand to learn something (about the meaning of sex or of our own lives) we could not otherwise know.

Further, I maintain that each of these is a *descriptive* proposition. It is simply a fact whether God exists, whether we are creatures or felicitous accidents, or whether a book is divinely inspired; nonetheless, the answers to these questions seem to carry with them ethical implications. If we truly are created beings, then presumably the decision to end our lives does *not* lie in our hands; whether a text is divinely inspired has great implications for whether we ought to follow its teachings.

Finally, in each case, one or both parties feels *constrained* by their belief about the relevant worldview facts; even if they find the public-reasons-style arguments compelling, there is a limit to how far they can follow them. That limit makes persistent disagreement highly likely.

## 1.2 – Clarifications and Initial Objections

The foregoing discussion enables us to distinguish three important premises. The first of these is the overarching assumption of this essay:

(P1) Many of our moral disagreements stem from disagreements about worldview propositions.

This idea provides the basis for my thought experiment. Yet, as I also argued in the foregoing,

(P2) There is a *fact* of the matter about worldview propositions.

Each of the scenarios rested, at bottom, on some descriptive proposition that must be either true or false. Finally, I suggested that the truth or falsehood of those propositions seems to carry with it ethical implications. We may codify this idea as follows:

(P3) Worldview propositions entail moral conclusions.

Two problems immediately arise with my addition of (P3). The first is that (P3) may not seem all that distinct from (P1). If many of our moral disagreements stem from prior disagreement about worldview propositions, wouldn't it be the case that such propositions entail moral conclusions? Not necessarily. You might be tempted to say that even if (P1) were *descriptively* true, this fact is merely accidental; there might be no *principled* link between moral disagreement and worldview propositions but only a (mistaken) tendency to see such a link. Yet if worldview propositions do entail moral conclusions, then it makes sense why we would find differing worldview commitments at the root of many moral disagreements.<sup>14</sup> The link is no mere accident.

Yet why think that worldview propositions do—or, more properly, *could*—entail moral conclusions? This raises the second objection. Whereas worldview propositions assert what “is” the case, moral propositions assert what “ought” to be. Thus, (P3)’s movement from one to the other seems like a classic violation of Hume’s Law. As Hume famously observed, the movement from *is* to *ought* “expresses some new relation” that is “entirely different from it.”<sup>15</sup> As such, “‘tis necessary that [this movement] should be observ’d and explain’d”—a feat, he claimed, that couldn’t be done.

Here, I offer one potential way forward by appealing to moral intuition. Consider the propositions “God exists” and “God commanded me to do X.” Does the truth of the former give you the sense that you *ought* to abide by the latter? I suspect many would answer no.<sup>16</sup> Yet, suppose I add to the former proposition the following statements:

- 1) God is all-knowing

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<sup>14</sup> Whether such inferences always occur on a *conscious* level is another matter. Though I gesture toward externalism in this respect, my response to the problem of disagreement is ultimately internalist. (See Sect. 2.3, footnote 36, for more on this distinction.)

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III.I.i.

<sup>16</sup> See R.M. Hare’s treatment of the topic in “Can I Be Blamed for Following Orders?” in *Applications of Moral Philosophy: New Studies in Practical Philosophy* (London: Palgrave, 1972), 2-3. Hare relies on an argument from Chapter 2 of Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.



- 2) He made us and knows us better than we know ourselves
- 3) Everything we have that is truly pleasing or satisfying, we received freely from God
- 4) God loves us; he wills our good in the deepest sense
- 5) He demonstrated the extent of this love through an excruciating death on our behalf, so that we could live in the joy of his presence forever
- 6) God's commands reflect his perfectly loving character, which is unchanging and the metaphysical ground of goodness
- 7) Everything God commands us to do, or not to do, is consistent with all of the above

Now, assuming that all of these are true, does their addition change your original intuition about the statement "God commanded me to do X"? I suspect that anyone who pauses long enough to seriously consider the above propositions, and to imagine their truth, will find that their intuition significantly increases with the second case. Although I chose to illustrate this with a theistic example, we could repeat the experiment with other worldviews. My point is this: whereas an isolated worldview proposition may do little to activate our moral intuitions, a *series* of such propositions, when conjoined, may greatly affect those intuitions.<sup>17</sup> Yet each of the propositions I have listed remains descriptive in nature. I suggest, therefore, contra Hume's Law, that it might indeed be possible to move from *is* to *ought*, when we expand our "aperture" to let in more data.

## **2. A Response to the Argument from Disagreement to Epistemological Skepticism**

Thus far, I have asked you to suppose that many of our moral disagreements stem from disagreements about worldview propositions (P1), that there is a *fact* of the matter about worldview propositions (P2) and that worldview propositions entail moral conclusions (P3). Yet, even if you grant all this, it remains the case that we must be able to *know the truth* of the worldview propositions. Only then can we hope to settle our disputes.

Critics might object here that I have led us to a dead end. My thought experiment is about as useful as a historian who claims that we could solve all the problems of history if we just used

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<sup>17</sup> We can expect our intuitions to increase even more when one is consciously considering said propositions.

a time machine. Without such a machine, his proposal gets us nowhere. So, too, with my assumptions about worldview disagreement. Yet, this objection hinges on the idea that we do not (or perhaps cannot?) have knowledge about worldview claims. That is a huge assumption, one not everyone shares. At the very least, such skeptics have work to do—to include responding to those who think we *can* have worldview knowledge.

In what follows, I will offer two basic responses to those who think the “three p’s” give us strong reason to adopt moral skepticism of the epistemological sort. My first response depicts an ideal case, in which my thought experiment make a decisive difference for our ability to know the truth of our moral beliefs, despite ongoing disagreement. My second response features a non-ideal case. In this situation, the *worldview claims themselves* are as controversial as the disputed moral beliefs.

## 2.1 Response to the Ideal Case

Consider first the ideal case. This argument pays special attention to the concept of peerhood. Of the “three p’s”, peerhood is the most worrisome.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of peer disagreement, moral disputes prove less troubling. Were a physics professor to find herself in a prolonged disagreement with her freshmen science students about some rarefied concept on which she is an expert, we would not call her to suspend her belief.

Nevertheless, “peerhood” is not a single thing. It permits of distinctions--e.g., between a peerhood of *skills* and one of *beliefs*. Take Claire and Iva, scientists in rival research programs. As concerns intelligence, practical reasoning, and technical ability, the two are identical. Nonetheless, the “lens” or paradigm with which Claire interprets her data is correct, while Iva’s is incorrect. Are

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<sup>18</sup> See Catherine Elgin, “Persistent Disagreement,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Feldman and Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 53-68, for a discussion of this point. See also Frances and Matheson, “Disagreement,” Section 4.

the two peers? In one sense, yes: they have a peerhood of skills. Yet, in another sense, no: they lack a peerhood of beliefs.<sup>19</sup> And since their beliefs shape how they interpret the data, they lack peerhood in a crucial respect.<sup>20</sup>

Now, suppose that in addition to the main premises of our thought experiment, we introduce two more. Not only is it the case that many moral disagreements stem from prior worldview disagreement, that the truth of moral propositions hinges on the truth of their related worldview propositions, and that there is a fact of the matter about worldview propositions, but also

(P4) It is possible to *know* the truth about worldview propositions, and

(P5) *S* *does* know the truth about the worldview propositions that matter to a given moral issue.

Suppose that, during their lunch hour, Claire and Iva find themselves locked in dispute about some moral claim. We already know that they are peers as concerns intelligence and practical reasoning, etc. Suppose, too, that both have a healthy background in philosophy and can make and evaluate nuanced arguments. Nevertheless, Claire's worldview beliefs on the subjects relevant to the moral dispute are true, while Iva's, alas, are false. Are they peers concerning the present dispute? No, they are not. The truth of their respective worldview beliefs determines the truth of their moral beliefs; since Claire knows the truth of the worldview beliefs, she can know the truth of the disputed moral belief—even should Iva persist in disagreement.

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<sup>19</sup> See Nathan L. King, "Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2012 (LXXXV): 257-260, for a discussion of how someone's (e.g., Smith's) background beliefs factor in another person's assessment of Smith's peerhood. King discusses background beliefs of a more general nature, whereas I, once again, am concerned with worldview-level beliefs.

<sup>20</sup> Elga likewise breaks symmetry by noting that "in the messy cases, one's reasoning about the disputed issue is tangled up with one's reasoning about many other matters"—what Elga calls "allied issues"—and that, once you adjust for these, two people may no longer be peers. See "Reflection and Disagreement," 492-493. It seems that not all allied issues would have to be on the same level as worldview propositions, though one can expect much overlap.

Yet if Claire and Iva really are peers as concerns intelligence, practical reasoning and technical ability, and if they both have a healthy exposure to philosophy, why then do they lack peerhood about worldview, and thus moral, beliefs? Shouldn't their peerhood of skills have led them to form similar worldview beliefs? Not necessarily. It could be that the evidence underdetermines any conclusion about worldview matters. Yet, supposing it did not, we might still expect disagreement. Perhaps Iva hasn't thought much about worldview issues, focusing exclusively on her research program. Perhaps such questions make her uncomfortable, or she assumes we could never know the answers, or she grew up in a community that discouraged its members from asking them or in which the dominant plausibility structures discount them.<sup>21</sup> Or perhaps she *has* considered the questions but under poor epistemic conditions—e.g., when tired or angry or with an instructor who had an axe to grind. Or perhaps, instead, the decisive factor lies with Claire: e.g., that she experienced some personal tragedy or existential crisis that led her to ask the questions more seriously than most people.<sup>22</sup> Such differences in environment, life circumstances, and even *personality* stand to make a notable difference in the content and quality of the women's worldview commitments. Therefore, we cannot assume that Claire and Iva's peerhood of skills will result in a peerhood of beliefs.

In short, given the assumptions of this "ideal" version of the thought experiment, it is possible to answer the argument from disagreement to epistemological skepticism and in way that is neither question begging nor egoistic—a nagging problem for proposed solutions to this form of skepticism.<sup>23</sup> If I am right in suggesting that many of our moral disagreements really do stem from worldview conflicts, and insofar as we really can gain knowledge about worldview

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<sup>21</sup> See Peter Berger's work on plausibility structures, which concerns society's influence on our religious beliefs.

<sup>22</sup> Frances and Matheson, "Disagreement," Section 4, call such considerations "disagreement factors."

<sup>23</sup> See Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, Chapter 1, for a discussion of the problem of egoism.

propositions, then this argument has tremendous implications for our ability to know moral facts despite the disagreements so common in our pluralistic society.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 What About the Non-Ideal Case?

Were I to stop here, many readers would feel cheated. They would do so because my discussion thus far has failed to address a looming question: What about cases where the *worldview claims* themselves are highly disputed?<sup>25</sup> We broke the symmetry of peer disagreement in the previous section by stipulating both that it is possible to know the truth about worldview propositions (P4) and that Claire does know the truth about those propositions that pertain to her moral dispute (P5). Yet, supposing the worldview claims are themselves disputed—as they inevitably are in our contemporary situation—what right has Claire to affirm P5?<sup>26</sup>

With that, we move from the ideal to the *non*-ideal case. What do we do when, for instance, two peers, both of them brilliant and honest, cannot agree about the relevant worldview claims? Suppose they have devoted years to studying the arguments yet have arrived at opposing conclusions. Can one have moral knowledge in those circumstances?

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<sup>24</sup> The answer I've provided here makes it theoretically possible for one member of a dispute to legitimately maintain his or her moral beliefs in the face of peer disagreement. For a discussion of how *both* sides might do so, see Alvin Goldman's "Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement," in *Disagreement*, eds. Feldman and Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010). Goldman's discussion centers on how different communities have different "epistemic systems"; his treatment of those differences suggests that they stem from divergent worldview commitments. (See, e.g., 198-199.)

Ernest Sosa also disputes the existence of epistemic peers on controversial questions, though for different reasons. See "The Epistemology of Disagreement," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Haddock, Millar, and Pritchard (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Feldman argues that we cannot merely trace our disagreements back to their source in our conflicting worldviews; we must scrutinize the worldviews themselves. See "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony (Oxford University Press, 2007), 205-206.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Frances raises this question in "The Epistemology of Real-world Religious Disagreement without Peers," *Philosophia Christi*, 20:1 (2018), 289.

This scenario raises important questions. First, is such a situation even possible?<sup>27</sup> And if so, what ought we to do when confronted with it? Should we surrender to the skeptic and become agnostic, both about worldview propositions and the moral beliefs that follow from them? Or does a reasonable means of resistance remain open to us?

For the present, assume that this situation *is* possible—i.e., that persistent, pervasive disagreement about worldview propositions really can occur among peers. As for what we ought to *do* about it, I grant that agnosticism has considerable appeal. Those who adopt this answer will conclude that my thought experiment has run aground at long last. We have succeeded only in pushing back the problem of disagreement from the original context of moral disputes to the *roots* of that conflict in worldview disagreement.

Can we avoid agnosticism by breaking the symmetry of peerhood? And can we do so in a way that is not question begging or egoistic? I believe we can. I shall propose two means of resolution. My claim is not that we *always* can or even that we *often* can, but simply that it is possible, in principle, to break this symmetry, provided we satisfy certain conditions.

### **2.3 First Response to the Non-Ideal Case**

Before I sketch a scenario in which someone breaks the symmetry of worldview-level peer disagreement, we first need to lay some groundwork. Take first the concept of “**epistemic access.**” This concept plays a large role in the account to follow. By epistemic access, I mean our ability to know the contents of someone’s innermost self. These include a person’s thoughts and memories but also his non- or quasi-rational motivations—e.g., his desires or fears. Were John to have full epistemic access to Ted’s mind and heart, he could “see” what Ted *really* thinks and feels about

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<sup>27</sup> Feldman argues it is *not*, saying “it cannot be that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence can reasonably come to different conclusions,” in “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” 213.

an issue, both what Ted reveals in conversation and what he does not (whether due to concealment or oversight, etc.).<sup>28</sup>

With this concept of full epistemic access before us, a crucial fact should now be clear: we do not—and, as things stand, *cannot*—have full epistemic access to another person’s mind and heart.<sup>29</sup> We have such access only to our own.<sup>30</sup> As for other people, all we have is what they choose to reveal, along with any inferences we may draw from their manner of life. Thus, we must distinguish between *full* and *partial* epistemic access. In our quest to know the thoughts and feelings of another person, partial access only gets us as far as that person is willing to go. In some cases, it may get us very far indeed, yet it is always, in principle, incomplete.

Most times, partial access does not bother us. It suffices for our ordinary conversations about the weather or our weekend plans. Where partial access proves troublesome is when we turn from the ordinary conversations to the “extraordinary” ones, where much more lies in the balance. Examples include what we think about: another person, or some controversial policy position, or a decision by our leadership. Could what I say offend my friend? If I tell my colleagues what I *really* think about this issue, will they shun me? Might I lose my job or my good standing at work if I speak my mind about the new turn in company policy? In such cases, the stakes are high. In fact, nowhere are they higher than on questions about the truth or falsehood of worldview claims, for those answers affect both our standing with others and ourselves. Our very manner of life, its

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<sup>28</sup> This last point includes the sorts of things Lackey calls “personal information” in “A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance,” 310. Yet it might also be that someone does not raise a point in conversation simply because she (mistakenly) deems it irrelevant to the issue at hand.

<sup>29</sup> King, “Disagreement: What’s the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find,” 256, argues that epistemic peers must share (among other things) the “same evidence.” Yet, some accounts of evidence include things like “perceptual experiences,” “seemings” and other *non-dialectical* entities—things, in short, to which we have *no access*, save for in ourselves. Frances and Matheson call this “private evidence” in “Disagreement,” Section 5.2.1.

<sup>30</sup> For now, I will assume that we do have, or at least *could* have, full epistemic access to ourselves. We sometimes talk of “deceiving ourselves,” which suggests the possibility of partial access even to oneself. Yet, even in such cases, our conscience often reminds us of the truth, enabling us to see through our self-deception. See also footnote 31.

justification, hangs in the balance.<sup>31</sup> This fact creates a bias.<sup>32</sup> It affects our willingness to reject certain propositions or to accept others, both publicly and within our own mind and heart.

How does this last point (call it “**high stakes**”) connect with our earlier points about epistemic access? Given (a) that we *lack direct access* to anyone but ourselves and (b) that the high stakes associated with worldview questions *biases* our answers, we face a two-fold challenge (or wall) in our dialogues with others. Insofar as John and Ted commit to an honest, no-holds-barred dialogue about some worldview matter, they can do much to lower the wall—or at least to reveal what lies beyond it. Nonetheless, they cannot remove it completely; it is a fixture of their existence as separate beings.<sup>33</sup> Ted may wonder, “Does John *really* find my argument unpersuasive, or is he just trying to maintain his manner of life?” John, of course, may wonder the same thing.

With that, we have laid all the necessary groundwork for my first of two responses to the non-ideal case and can now consider the answer. To illustrate my proposal, consider the case of Mrs. Brown. Mrs. Brown has the reputation of being a wise and honest woman, and she *is*—both intensely acute and utterly honest, not just with others but also with herself. Now, suppose she has

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<sup>31</sup> Aldous Huxley illustrates this point beautifully in *Ends and Means* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), [https://archive.org/stream/endsandmeans035237mbp/endsandmeans035237mbp\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/endsandmeans035237mbp/endsandmeans035237mbp_djvu.txt). There, he writes, “I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning...For myself, as, no doubt, for many of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation,” both political and sexual (Chap. XIV, “Beliefs”).

<sup>32</sup> Katia Vavova, “Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2014 (28): 324, quoting Russ Shafer-Landau, makes a similar point about ethics, when saying, “there’s typically much...at stake in ethical matters...and these stakes tend to introduce biasing factors that skew correct perception.” Such bias at least partly explains the persistence of our ethical debates.

<sup>33</sup> Sosa also notes that opponents cannot fully reveal the grounds for their controversial beliefs to one another, which helps break the symmetry of peerhood. See “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” 295. The addition of “high stakes” in my account further widens the gap between supposed peers.

It’s worth noting that Sosa questions whether one can fully perceive one’s *own* grounds for belief (290-291). This does not undermine my response, since (1) it’s clear that we still know *more* about our own grounds than we do our opponents, at least in many cases, yet also because (2) one’s worldview beliefs have such importance for one’s life that people often take special pains to record their grounds or recite them continually, thus aiding retrieval. (See, e.g., Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:30-31.)



a passion for “the big questions” and has spent the last decade of her retired life reading, thinking and talking with others about the various answers. Through this process, she forms what she considers highly justified beliefs about the answers, ones with implications for a number of ethical questions. Mrs. Brown knows that other people, just as intelligent, dispute her conclusions. (She has read many of their books, and one such author is her long-time friend.) Nonetheless, she finds their arguments wanting; and, as for whether anything *else* might be motivating their worldview positions (recall “high stakes”), she lacks “full access” and so refuses to speculate. For her part, she is firmly convinced in her own mind, both about the strength of her position but also about the goodness of her motives. She knows her biases and has taken special care to adjust for them. She simply wants the truth.

Given this, can Mrs. Brown justifiably claim to have knowledge, both of worldview matters and their resulting ethical propositions, despite these authors’ ongoing disagreement?<sup>34</sup> Or should she adopt agnosticism? I answer no: she should not adopt agnosticism. The reason? She lacks “full access” to any but her own beliefs and motives; and, when she examines those, she finds her arguments strong and her motives pure, with her biases in check.<sup>35</sup>

Yet doesn’t this constitute egoism? No. I do not suggest that Mrs. Brown can side with her beliefs *simply because they are hers*. Her warrant stems from the following three facts. First, she is convinced that the reasons in support of her position *really are stronger* than those against it.

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<sup>34</sup> I am using “knowledge” in a loose sense, to include highly justified beliefs.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Fumerton offers a similar view in “You Can’t Trust a Philosopher,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Feldman and Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 103-105. There, Fumerton argues that self-knowledge, coupled with an awareness that philosophers sometimes have dubious grounds for the beliefs they profess, lessen the force of some peer disagreement.

See also Ralph Wedgwood’s “The Moral Evil Demons,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 219-244. Both thinkers hold that the unique kind of access we have to our own mental states diminishes the problem of peer disagreement. My introduction of “high stakes” deepens this discussion by giving a specific, highly plausible reason for questioning our interlocutors’ testimonies about their worldview beliefs. The problem of partial access, then, grows especially acute in cases of worldview disagreement.

(Recall her mental acuity and the amount of time she has invested in the relevant inquiries.) Second, when she examines her conscience, she finds that she is taking every effort to prevent her biases from prejudicing her assessment of the case. (Recall her unwavering honesty.) Yet, third and finally, Mrs. Brown has no foolproof way of scrutinizing her interlocutors' real motives—not to mention whether they have considered all and exactly the same evidence<sup>36</sup>—given her partial access to them. For these reasons, Mrs. Brown can justly maintain her moral beliefs.

For the sake of clarity, let us formalize the above conditions as follows.

If:

(i) S has thoroughly scrutinized the case for and against some worldview claim, such that she is convinced about the answer; and,

(ii) S honestly seeks the truth, refusing to cater to bias; and

(iii) S lacks full access to the mind and heart of anyone but herself,

Then S is justified in maintaining her worldview (and resulting moral) belief(s), *despite ongoing disagreement*.<sup>37</sup>

Some may fear that these conditions are too easily met. I reply that (i) and (ii) are by no means easy. Sure, we can imagine people giving a thoughtless nod in their own favor, but such people do not resemble Mrs. Brown. *She* is our example, and she is a wise and honest woman. If we take (i) and (ii) seriously, we may find that we cannot affirm them for ourselves.

Yet what about (iii), the distinction between full and partial epistemic access? Doesn't this give *default support* for Mrs. Brown's position, being outside her (and everyone's) control? Were

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<sup>36</sup> See King's work on the "same evidence condition" and the challenges of meeting it in "Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find," 253-8. He does a thorough job of sketching the precise (and formidable) obstacles to establishing peerhood, generally, whereas I seek to emphasize the challenge arising from the consideration of *worldview* propositions, specifically.

<sup>37</sup> Conditions (i)-(iii) form an internalist (rather than externalist) account of the justification for one's worldview beliefs. In other words, S *recognizes* that her beliefs are highly justified. For more on this distinction, see "A Version of Internalist Strong Foundationalism," in *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues*, ed. Sosa and Bonjour (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

we to consider this condition by itself, then yes, it would provide default (and thus unwarranted) support. That said, we do *not* consider it by itself. It stands—and must stand—in relation to the other two conditions; where those two fail, then epistemic access cannot justify Mrs. Brown in siding with herself.

To be clear, I do not wish to minimize (iii)'s role in my argument. Were we to remove it, (i) and (ii) would likely collapse in the face of peer disagreement. Why? Because knowing our peer disagreed with us might cause us to question whether we really *had* scrutinized the case for a worldview claim as fully as we ought. Thus, (iii) plays an indispensable part in our ability to break the symmetry of disagreement. We might codify this as follows:

**Asymmetric Access:** We have available to us a kind of access to our thoughts and motives that is qualitatively different from that which we have toward anyone else's, and which allows us to know things about our relationship to a proposition *p* that we could never know about another person's, especially when the stakes are high.

Asymmetric Access makes it possible to know: whether we really have scrutinized the case for *p*, whether we did so fairly, and whether we really do believe *p*. It does all this while making it impossible for us to know the same facts about another person. Thus it is Asymmetric Access, represented by (iii), which, when met with the right conditions, (i) and (ii), allows us to break the symmetry of peer disagreement.

Christensen observes:

The literature on disagreement has concentrated on *artificially simple cases* designed to support or refute general principles governing the correct response to disagreement...But in real controversies, we lack the sort of track record that provides for robust evaluation in some of the artificial cases.<sup>38</sup>

I have taken this point one step further. We do not simply lack the needed track record as a matter of happenstance; we lack it as a matter of *principle*. Asymmetric Access renders a complete

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<sup>38</sup> See David Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy," *Philosophy Compass* 2009 (4/5): 765, my emphasis.

gathering of the data impossible. This does not mean we should stop debating worldview questions with each other; it simply means that given the high stakes and our inability to look into the heart and mind of another person to gather all relevant data, we cannot make a full assessment about peerhood.

Once again, I do not claim that my solution works for most or even *many* cases. It may work for very few. How often do we run across people like Mrs. Brown? Nevertheless, when we do, and when the abovementioned conditions hold, we find a non-question begging, non-egotistical way of breaking symmetry and, thus, of blocking the inference from disagreement to epistemic skepticism—even in non-ideal cases of worldview disagreement.

#### **2.4 Second Response to the Non-Ideal Case**

My second response to the non-ideal case centers on a question. *Could it be the case that there are some worldview propositions, support for which lies beyond a reasonable doubt? That, were we to commit the time and attention necessary to seriously grapple with all the evidence, in as impartial a manner as possible, we would be forced to give our assent—or else violate our rationality?*

This is a *very* strong question. Yet suppose we answered yes, it could be the case. More than that, suppose it *were* the case. What relevance would this have for instances of non-ideal disagreement about worldview questions? It seems to me it would eliminate (or render impotent) all “three p’s” of the disagreement problem.

Before defending that claim, I should clarify what I take myself to be doing by raising this question. In Sections 2.1-2.3, I aimed to break the symmetry of peer disagreement directly. That is not the strategy I’m taking here. Those who resist the answer I gave in 2.3 might do so under the assumption that worldview disagreements simply cannot be resolved—e.g., that the evidence

for or against them underdetermines a rational verdict. I want to shift the burden to such skeptics. Why should we accept the claim that the evidence for worldview propositions underdetermines our belief in them? At the very least, we cannot settle the matter *a priori*, like Hume attempted to do in the area of miracles. Rather, as critics of Hume have urged, we must “be bothered to descend into the fray and discuss the argument[s] in detail.”<sup>39</sup> My purpose here is to unpack the implications of such a project, should the evidence for some worldview proposition(s) prove beyond a reasonable doubt.

Take the problem of “persistence.” We may safely assume that some people will argue for (or against) some worldview claim *no matter what*. Nevertheless, supposing that: (a) there is in fact some worldview proposition, support for which lies beyond a reasonable doubt, and (b) someone has given the evidence sufficient time and attention, etc., then even if that person faces persistent disagreement, he or she can do so untroubled. Our suppositions render “persistence” impotent.

The same holds true with “pervasive.” Just as there are some people who will affirm or deny some position no matter what, so too there may be *many* such people. This makes no difference, given our above assumptions. Their disagreement becomes impotent.

Lastly, consider “peerhood.” Let us take not just *any* peers but two of the brightest peers imaginable, both of them hungry for the truth. This matters because, presumably, if such peers cannot arrive at agreement, then we are all doomed and should at once become agnostics about worldview (and thus *moral*) propositions. Yet recall our assumption. We are assuming that were such peers to commit the time and attention necessary to seriously grapple with all the evidence,

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<sup>39</sup> See Tim and Lydia McGrew’s “The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), ed. Craig and Moreland, 659, for a thorough response to Hume on this topic.

as impartially as possible, they would be forced to give their assent—or else violate their rationality. Suppose that, in the process of doing this, they both agree on the conclusion. In this case, “peerhood” remains but the *disagreement* vanishes. Yet suppose instead that, after going through the process, one of them continues to resist the conclusion. In that case, disagreement remains but now *peerhood* disappears. For, if one cannot disagree without violating his or her rationality, in what sense can we still call these people intellectual peers? Either way, the problem disappears.

In short, if some worldview proposition(s) really exists, the evidence for which cannot reasonably be doubted, then this enables us to block the inference from disagreement to epistemological skepticism—even in non-ideal cases. To be clear, I have not argued that such a worldview proposition *does* exist. That would take a very different work than the present essay. I claim only that *were* it the case, this fact would hold tremendous implications.

### 3. Conclusion

I have offered three, non-question-begging responses to the argument from disagreement to moral skepticism—one to ideal, yet two to non-ideal, cases. Nonetheless, my thought experiment began with an assumption—that many of our moral disagreements stem from disagreements about worldview propositions—and some readers may question that assumption. They might suspect that were we to lay bare the foundations of most people’s ethical judgments, what we would find would not be a rational process of worldview inferences but a chaotic or largely emotive situation.<sup>40</sup> And if so, then my answer to the skeptic never gets off the ground.

Though I admit many people’s ethical judgments may resemble this sub-rational picture, I don’t think it undermines my argument. The reason? There remains a core group of thinkers who

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<sup>40</sup> I thank Mark Jensen for raising this challenge, with reference to the work of Alasdair McIntyre.

self-consciously aspire to ground their moral judgments in reasons, and it is they I have in mind with this project. One might think here of Nietzsche’s “revaluation of values,” predicated in part on his belief that “God is dead,” or the many philosophers who pursue reflective equilibrium. Moreover, such people have had considerable influence, if only indirectly, on the moral judgements of their broader societies. Thus, we could simply revise (P1) to say that “many of our moral disagreements stem (ultimately or originally) from disagreements about worldview propositions.” The basic picture remains the same.

Yet here a new worry arises. Supposing my argument succeeds, what might this mean for public debates in societies like ours where worldview beliefs profoundly differ? Much work has been done to get us to frame our appeals in ways that *eschew* worldview claims so as to maximize the number of people they might persuade. Should we abandon this project, not least when some Christians have had notable success?<sup>41</sup>

No. We can and should continue to appeal to public reasons. I say this confidently, since I believe that God has intelligible reasons for his commands, which non-Christians and non-Theists can appreciate. Nonetheless, such appeals only go so far. In fact, we seem to be confronting that limit increasingly, as, e.g., more of our neighbors adopt different views of anthropology and human flourishing—views that are themselves worldview propositions. As such, we should not be surprised when our attempts at public reasoning arrive at stalemates.<sup>42</sup>

Fortunately, the church has a long history of prompting discussion about worldview matters—on college campuses, in books, at places like L’Abri—and of arguing persuasively for

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<sup>41</sup> I am thinking here of the famous debate between Robert George and Stanley Fish regarding the ethics of abortion, in which George, a Christian, convinced Fish, a post-modernist, to abandon his pro-choice position, based solely on an appeal to public reasons. (See “Stanley Fish, Pro-Lifer,” *The Weekly Standard*, September 21 1998, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/the-scrapbook/stanley-fish-pro-lifer>.)

<sup>42</sup> Sosa makes a similar point about the expected limits of public debate, though for different reasons. See “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” 295.

precisely those issues that bear on many of these moral debates. Thus, if my thought experiment rings true, then it reveals a further reason why such efforts matter. May they continue and flourish.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> My thanks go out to Betty Talbert, Daniel Wodak, the U.S. Air Force Academy's Philosophy of Religion Reading Group, and the blind reviewer from *Philosophia Christi*, all of whose feedback has been enormously helpful. The views expressed in this article are solely my own and do not represent an official position of the U.S. Air Force Academy or the Department of Defense.