

The Epistemology of Moral Disagreement

Abstract

This article is about the implications of a conciliatory view about the epistemology of peer disagreement for our moral beliefs. Many have endorsed a conciliatory view about the epistemology of peer disagreement according to which if we find ourselves in a disagreement about some matter with another whom we should judge to be our epistemic peer on that matter, we must revise our judgment about that matter. This article focuses on three issues about the implications of conciliationism for our moral beliefs. Firstly, whether there is an asymmetry between the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs and the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our non-moral beliefs; for instance, some have argued that conciliationism leads to epistemological moral skepticism but not to epistemological non-moral skepticism. Secondly, what the implications of conciliationism are for the epistemic status of particular moral beliefs. Thirdly, whether conciliationism's impact on the epistemic status of our moral beliefs has practical implications.

1. Conciliationism

We frequently find ourselves in deep seemingly irresolvable disagreements about moral issues. For instance, we find ourselves in disagreements about the morality of abortion, bombing other countries, torture, strongly redistributive taxation, killing one person to save five, euthanasia, and eating meat for fun. Many of these disagreements seem to be deep because they seem to be disagreements that are due to disagreements in fundamental non-derivative moral judgments. For instance, many pro-lifers think that foetuses have a moral status, many pro-choicers disagree and there is no more fundamental moral judgment that these conflicting moral judgments derive from. And many of these deep moral disagreements can also seem to be irresolvable. For it is hard to imagine that (all or most) pro-choices and pro-lifers, libertarians and socialists, and act-consequentialists and Kantians could come to agree about the moral matters that they disagree about by changing their fundamental moral judgments.

Deep seemingly irresolvable disagreements seem particularly troubling when those with whom we disagree seem to be open-minded, seem to have thought about the moral issues that are in contention at least as much as we have, and seem to be just as well-informed as we are about the non-moral morally relevant facts; that is, deep seemingly irresolvable disagreements seem particularly troubling when we find ourselves in moral disagreements with those who are approximately our epistemic equals. For when we find ourselves in a moral disagreement with our epistemic equals we might wonder how we could be justified in thinking that we and not they are correct about the moral issue about which we disagree.

Conciliationism about *epistemic peer* disagreement may explain why finding ourselves in deep seemingly irresolvable disagreements about morality with our epistemic equals is particularly troubling. For according to conciliationism, approximately, if we find ourselves in a disagreement about some matter p and there is a substantial division of opinion regarding whether p amongst those who are our epistemic equals about whether p , then we are not justified in believing that p or that not- p ; in such circumstances, according to conciliationism, we should suspend belief regarding whether p . In the rest of this section I will explain conciliationism in detail before, in the rest of this article, discussing the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs.

1.1. Epistemic Peerhood

Our epistemic peers about a matter are our epistemic equals on this matter.¹ Those with whom we took high school math classes and who were about as good as we were at mental math in these classes are plausibly our epistemic peers when it comes to mental math questions. We might see those with whom we went to grad school as our epistemic peers about any randomly chosen question about contemporary philosophy or the history of philosophy. And most people that we talk to in person are our epistemic peers about whether it is raining where we are when we talk to them.

There are two main views about exactly what it takes for another to be our epistemic peer on some matter. According to the *epistemic virtues view*, A is our epistemic peer about

¹ See Matheson (2015, §2.1) and Goldman and Blanchard (2015, §3.4).

p iff A has been exposed to the same evidence and arguments regarding whether p as we have, has the same relevant background knowledge as we have, and possesses general epistemic virtues (such as intelligence, freedom from bias, reasoning skill) to the same degree that we do.² According to the *likelihood* view, A is our epistemic peer about whether p iff A is as likely as we are to be right about whether p .³

There are cases in which these two views come apart. Suppose that Alex is a professional mathematician who is generally more epistemically virtuous than I am. And suppose that Alex and I are both asked to figure out 4×12 . The likelihood that we will provide the right answer is the same, so according to *the likelihood* view, we are epistemic peers on this issue. But according to the *epistemic virtues* view, Alex is my epistemic superior regarding 4×12 .⁴ However, it does not seem right that Alex is my epistemic superior in this case for although Alex is my epistemic superior regarding mathematics—and regarding other matters that engage the capacities that make her more epistemically virtuous than I am—she seems to be my *epistemic equal* regarding the answer to 4×12 .⁵ So, it seems that we should accept the *likelihood* view.⁶

However, in order to figure out whether another is as likely to be right about a particular proposition p as we are we need to ascertain whether they have similar evidence and background knowledge to us regarding p and whether they have similar reasoning skill to us regarding p . And sometimes the only evidence that we have regarding another's

² See Kelly (2005, p. 168, n. 2) and Christensen (2009, pp. 756-757).

³ See, for instance, Elga (2007, p. 493). The likelihood view and the view that our epistemic peers about a particular matter are those who are just as reliable as we are when it comes to that matter are sometimes taken to be equivalent; see, for instance, Worsnip (2014, p. 2). For discussion of both views see Killoren (2010, pp. 15-20).

⁴ See Frances (2014, p. 45)

⁵ As stated the *epistemic virtues* view will also entail the counter-intuitive result that those who are generally extremely epistemically virtuous but have a blind spot for issues in a particular domain D are our epistemic peers about matters in D even if we are extremely generally epistemically virtuous and do not have the same blind spot. However, this problem could be ameliorated by revising the *epistemic virtues* view to the view that A is our epistemic peer about p iff A is as generally epistemically virtuous as we are and as epistemically virtuous regarding p (or issues in the same domain as p) in particular as we are.

⁶ See also Worsnip (2014, p. 2). Perhaps the *epistemic virtues* view could be revised in the following way: A is B 's epistemic peer regarding p iff A has epistemic virtues relevant to p to the same extent as B . However, it seems to me that so revised such a version of the *epistemic virtues* view may just collapse into or be extensionally equivalent to the *likelihood* view (at least in the vast majority of cases); for it seems that if A has the epistemic virtues relevant to p to the same extent as B , then A will be as likely to be right regarding p as B . (Analogously, some such as Hooker (2002) argue that the best version of virtue ethics collapses into a form of rule-consequentialism).

reasoning ability regarding a particular proposition is their reasoning ability regarding other (relevantly similar) propositions. So, although we should accept the *likelihood* view, we might often talk as if we accept the *epistemic virtues* view because often when thinking about whether another is as likely to be right about a particular proposition *p* as we are we will think about the evidence they possess, their reasoning skill, or other epistemic virtues that they have.

1.2. The Epistemic Significance of Peer Disagreement

I'll call the circumstance of finding oneself in a disagreement with another whom one *should believe* to be one's epistemic peer about whether *p* a circumstance in which one finds oneself in a peer disagreement about whether *p*.⁷ There is a debate about the epistemic significance of *peer disagreement* and this debate is a debate about whether, and the extent to which, we should revise our belief about some matter after finding ourselves in a peer disagreement regarding the content of that belief. If we should revise our belief about whether *p* in light of peer disagreement about whether *p*, then peer disagreement undermines the epistemic justification of the belief that we previously had.

We can think of views about how we should respond to peer disagreements as falling along a spectrum.⁸ According to views towards one end of this spectrum, which we can call more *conciliatory views*, finding oneself in a peer disagreement about some matter should typically lead one to revise one's view or one's confidence in one's view about that matter. According to views towards the other end of this spectrum, which we can call more steadfast views, finding oneself in a peer disagreement about some matter usually or often should not lead one to revise one's beliefs or one's confidence about that matter.⁹

In this article I am interested in the implications of conciliatory views for our moral beliefs. There are problems with conciliatory views.¹⁰ But many philosophers, including

⁷ I'll presume, with Christensen (2009, p. 756) and Wietmarschen (2013, p. 395) that the debate about the epistemic significance of peer disagreement is a debate mainly about how we should respond to disagreements that we should, or have good reason to, believe to be peer disagreements. See also Setiya (2012, pp. 16-17).

⁸ See Christensen (2009, p. 756).

⁹ For an introduction to these views see Christensen (2009) and Matheson (2015, §3-4).

¹⁰ For an introduction to these problems see Matheson (2015, §4.2). For a particularly helpful articulation and pressing of the self-defeat objection see Decker (2014). For discussion of some of these objections see *infra* note 11.

many moral philosophers, have argued for conciliatory views.¹¹ And our intuitions about certain cases support a certain conciliatory view. To see this, suppose that in

Restaurant. I am at dinner with a large number of my friends, at the end of dinner my friends and I decide to split the bill. And I decide that I am going to mentally calculate how much everyone owes for dinner. I calculate that everyone owes \$35. But when I tell one of my friends about my calculation she tells me that she has also mentally calculated how much we each owe and has come to the conclusion that we each owe \$40. I have known this friend well for twenty years and I know that she is just as good at mental mathematical calculations as I am.

It seems that in this case I should suspend belief about whether everyone owes \$35 or \$40 for dinner.¹²

1.3. All-or-Nothing Belief or Degrees of Belief

In *Restaurant* it seems that we should adjust our all-or-nothing belief about how much everyone owes (that is, we should adjust whether we believe or do not believe that everyone owes \$35).¹³ But sometimes peer disagreement can require changes in our degree of confidence or degree of belief without requiring a change in our all-or-nothing belief. For instance, suppose that my friend Laura is my epistemic peer about whether we have free will but her degree of belief that we do not have free will is barely sufficient to constitute an all-or-nothing belief that we do not have free will and I have a degree of confidence that we do have free will that is extremely high. In this case, if I take Laura's belief and my own about free will equally seriously, and so split the difference between our views, then it seems that I will still have an all-or-nothing belief that we have free will but just have less confidence in this belief.¹⁴ So, a conciliatory view about the consequences of peer disagreement for the epistemic status of both our degrees of belief

¹¹ For an introduction see Matheson (2015, §4.1). For the most well-known articulations, discussions, and defences of more conciliatory views, see Christensen (2007) (2011), Elga (2007), Feldman (2006), Kelly (2010), and Lackey (2010). For moral philosophers articulating conciliatory views see, for instance, Sidgwick (1907/1981, p. 342), Parfit (2011, pp. 427-428), and McGrath (2008). For more steadfast views see, for instance, Kelly (2005), Wedgwood (2010), and Enoch (2010).

¹² See Christensen (2007, pp. 193-194) (2009, p. 757).

¹³ See Christensen (2007, pp. 213-214).

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 214

and our all-or-nothing beliefs seems plausible.¹⁵ However, I will—following others—focus on a conciliatory view about all-or-nothing belief as the implications of a conciliatory view that are most interesting for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs are implications regarding the justification of our all-or-nothing moral beliefs. (For instance, the argument that conciliationism entails moral skepticism that I discuss in §2 is a consequence of conciliationism as a thesis regarding the status of our all-or-nothing beliefs).¹⁶

1.4. The Importance of a Substantial Division of Opinion Amongst Peers

It seems to me that it is crucial in *Restaurant* that there is a substantial division of opinion amongst peers; in this case I have only one peer with a view about how much everyone owes and this peer and I disagree. But if there was not a substantial division of opinion about how much everyone owes, it would not seem that I should revise my belief in this case. Suppose that I reasonably believed everyone at dinner to be my epistemic peer when it comes to mental mathematics, everyone mentally calculated how much everyone owes for dinner, and 19/20 of those other than me at dinner came to the conclusion that we each owe \$35; 1/20 came to the conclusion that we each owe \$40. In this variation of *Restaurant* the fact that one of my friends came to the conclusion that we each owe \$40 does not obviously seem to make it the case that I should revise my judgment about how much each of us owe for dinner. For in this case, I have reason to believe that she (the 1/20) rather than I has made a mental mathematical mistake because most of those who are as reliable as I am at mental mathematics have come to the same conclusion as I have come to rather than the conclusion that she has come to. And because most of my peers agree with me the best explanation of my disagreement with my friend in this case seems to be that she, rather than I, made a mistake.¹⁷

1.5. Conciliationism

So, we have reason to accept a conciliationist view about cases of peer disagreement in which there is a substantial division of opinion amongst peers. Take a substantial division

¹⁵ I assume that Christensen (2007, p. 213) is right that there is no uncontroversial view about the relationship between degrees of belief and all-or-nothing belief.

¹⁶ See §2-4 below. Many, such as Frances (2014) and McGrath (2008, pp. 91-92), focus on the implications of peer disagreement for the status of our all-or-nothing beliefs.

¹⁷ This explanation seems to me to be a better explanation because it involves attributing less error. On whether the number of peers matters see McGrath (2008, pp. 94-95), Setiya (2012, pp. 18-19), Lackey (2013), and Frances (2014, pp. 94-99).

of opinion amongst peers about whether p to be (approximately) between a 40/60 and a 60/40 split about whether p . The notion of a substantial division of opinion becomes a little more complicated when we have disagreement about what the best theory of X is. Take a substantial division of opinion regarding what the best theory of X is to be a division of opinion regarding this matter in which there is no clear majority position regarding the best theory of X . According to the view that I will hereafter refer to as

Conciliationism. If we find ourselves in a position in which we should believe that there is a substantial division of opinion amongst our epistemic peers regarding whether p and that we and our epistemic peers are approximately as confident as one another regarding whether p , then, other things equal, we should suspend belief about whether p .¹⁸

1.6. The Implications of Conciliationism for the Status of our Moral Beliefs

There is a good *prima facie* case for the view that conciliationism will have important implications for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. Surveys seem to show that U.S. opinion splits close to 50/50 on the morality of abortion, the death penalty, same-sex relationships, and physician-assisted suicide.¹⁹ And according to a recent philpapers survey, tenured political philosophers split exactly 50/50 on whether justice requires equality and tenured moral philosophers split 35%/23%/12%/30% on whether deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, or some ‘other’ view is the right view about normative ethics.²⁰ These surveys seem to show that for any controversial moral view that we hold we have reason to believe that there is a substantial division of opinion amongst our epistemic peers about this moral issue.²¹

In response to this *prima facie* case it might be argued that conciliationism has very few implications for any of our beliefs because, for any p , no one is *exactly* as likely as we are to be correct about whether p , so no one is (exactly) our epistemic peer about whether p

¹⁸ What if the majority of A 's epistemic peers regarding p disagree with A regarding p ? In this case, *ceteris paribus*, A should at least give up her belief regarding p and A should perhaps convert to the view that her epistemic peers regarding p hold. (However, see the discussion of moral deference in §2 below).

¹⁹ See McCarthy (2014).

²⁰ See <http://philpapers.org/surveys>.

²¹ See also McGrath (2008, pp. 94-95).

and we should not believe that anyone is exactly our epistemic peer regarding whether p . However, it seems that in the cases discussed above we have good evidence that others are approximately our epistemic peers about a variety of moral issues. And in these cases we should believe that many others are either our epistemic peers or superiors regarding the relevant moral issues.²²

This article focuses on three issues regarding the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. §2 discusses whether there is an asymmetry between the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs and the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our non-moral beliefs. §3 discusses the implications of conciliationism for our beliefs about particular moral issues. §4 discusses whether conciliationism's impact on the epistemic status of our moral beliefs has practical implications.

2. Asymmetric Views of the Implications of Conciliationism in the Moral and Non-Moral Domains

2.1. *Are Our Moral Beliefs Insulated from the Consequences of Conciliationism?*

Some have argued that our moral beliefs are particularly insulated from the implications of conciliationism. According to this view, although conciliationism entails that we must revise some or many of our non-moral beliefs in light of peer disagreement, conciliationism does not entail that we must revise many or any of our moral views in light of peer disagreement.

Some have claimed that our moral beliefs are particularly insulated from the implications of conciliationism because we cannot be required to take others' (purely) moral beliefs into account when figuring out what to believe about a moral issue. Call this the *no requirement of pure moral deference view*. According to this view, although we may be required to take others' views about morally relevant facts—such as their views about the likely consequences of an action—into account when forming beliefs we could not be required

²² See Matheson (2015, §2.2).

to take others' beliefs about the purely moral matter of the rightness or wrongness of performing an action with particular consequences into account when forming beliefs.²³

There are several different arguments for the *no requirement of pure moral deference view*. Some have argued that a requirement to alter our (purely) moral beliefs in light of the moral views of others would violate our autonomy. And requirements on altering our beliefs cannot so violate our autonomy.²⁴ But it seems that such a requirement that we sometimes take others' purely moral views into account when forming moral beliefs does not breach our autonomy because such a requirement would only require that we be to some extent guided by, rather than that we are blindly obedient to, the purely moral views of others.²⁵

Others have argued that a requirement to alter our moral beliefs in light of the (purely) moral views of others would prevent us from fully understanding why particular actions have the moral status that they have (why right actions are right for instance). And epistemic requirements that we alter our moral beliefs in certain ways could not be such that they prevent us from fully understanding why particular actions have the moral status that they have.²⁶ So, the *no requirement of pure moral deference view* holds.²⁷

However, conciliationism, as I've articulated it at least, is only a thesis about when we should *suspend belief* or reduce our confidence in our beliefs. And proponents of the prevention of understanding argument for the *no requirement of pure moral deference view* only argue that if we were required to *positively believe* the correct pure moral views that others hold just because others hold these views, then we would have less moral understanding that we would have if we positively believed these correct moral views through truly understanding these views and their correctness. But in this case, the argument for the *no requirement of pure moral deference view* from the prevention of moral understanding cannot establish any conclusions about the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. For even if this argument establishes that we could not be

²³ The *no requirement of pure moral deference view* entails:

Moral Testimony Pessimism. We should not take the purely moral testimony of others into account when forming purely moral beliefs.

For an introduction to the debate about *Moral Testimony Pessimism* see Hills (2013).

²⁴ See Wolf (1970, pp. 13-14).

²⁵ See Nguyen (2010, pp. 113-122).

²⁶ See Nickel (2001), Hopkins (2007, pp. 19-20), and Hills (2009).

²⁷ For discussion see Nguyen (2010, pp. 122-127).

required (or are not often required) to hold the positive pure moral views of others on the basis that others hold these views this argument could not establish that we are not required to reduce our confidence in our moral views or suspend moral belief on the basis that others hold particular moral views.

Furthermore, some have argued that the argument for the *no requirement of pure moral deference view* from the prevention of moral understanding fails because altering our (purely) moral beliefs in light of disagreement in (pure) moral beliefs with others facilitates our understanding of morality rather than preventing us from acquiring a greater understanding of morality.²⁸ This line of response to the understanding-based argument seems right to me, for it seems that reducing our confidence in our pure moral views in light of peer disagreement is the first step to gaining a better moral understanding—a first step that may lead to our having positive moral views either similar to or different from those we had before we moderated our views in response to peer disagreement.²⁹ So we lack reason to hold the *no requirement of pure moral deference view*. (Several have also recently argued that we must reject the *no requirement of pure moral deference view*).³⁰

Kieran Setiya has presented a different argument for the view that moral beliefs are particularly insulated from the implications of conciliationism. Setiya argues that even if a conciliatory view about non-moral peer disagreements is plausible a conciliatory view about moral peer disagreements is implausible. So, if conciliationism holds, it holds only for our non-moral beliefs.³¹ Setiya claims that our intuitions about the following type of

²⁸ See *ibid.* pp. 122-127.

²⁹ It is not obvious to me that the claim that reducing our confidence in our moral views in light of peer disagreement about these views is often the first step to acquiring greater moral understanding is inconsistent with anything that proponents of the moral understanding argument against pure moral deference such as Hills (2009) say. Hills' target seems to me to be blind deference to the views of others rather than moderation of our views or suspension of judgment before searching for deeper understanding. It is also worth noting that Hills (2009, pp. 123-124), for instance, does not claim that we are never required to defer to the pure moral views of others but only that we should not defer to the pure moral views of others when we can either defer to the views of others or gain a true moral understanding ourselves.

³⁰ See Wiland (forthcoming) and Enoch (2014).

³¹ It might seem that I have mischaracterized Setiya's view as an asymmetry view because it might seem that Setiya takes the argument that he makes—see below—to show the falsity of conciliatory views quite generally. However, firstly, some of what Setiya says seems to imply that he takes his argument to be restricted to moral epistemology only; see, for instance, Setiya (2012, pp. 5-6). Secondly, it seems that showing that there are counter-examples to conciliationism when applied to disagreements with epistemic peers about moral issues only counts in favour of

case show that conciliationism about peer disagreements about moral issues is implausible. Suppose that we were confronted with members of a community of human beings who share all of our non-moral beliefs and are clearly just as intelligent and socially developed as we are but who have uniformly horrific moral beliefs; suppose that, for instance, they believe that we should brutally kill the innocent for the pleasure of the many. According to Setiya, a conciliatory view would entail that in this case we should alter our judgment about whether it is wrong to brutally kill the innocent for the pleasure of the many. But this is implausible for ‘we should not defer to moral monsters but condemn them, however numerous they are’.³² So, according to Setiya, we should reject a conciliatory view about peer disagreement regarding moral issues.

However, although Setiya is right that we should not defer to moral monsters, this does not show that we should reject a conciliatory view about peer disagreement regarding moral issues. This is because we have no reason to believe that Setiya’s moral monsters are our epistemic peers about *moral issues*; for if we encounter people who have all the same non-moral beliefs as we have but who have uniformly very different horrific moral beliefs, then we have not encountered people whom we yet have any reason to believe to be our epistemic peers about moral issues. For in order to have reason to believe that someone is our epistemic peer about some matter we have to have reason to believe that they are as likely to be right about this matter as we are. But the fact that someone shares all the same non-moral beliefs as us is no reason to believe that they are as likely to be right about moral matters as we are; just as the fact that A is as likely to be right about any mental mathematical calculation as we are is no reason to believe that A is as likely to be right about any matter of physics or philosophy as we are. And conciliationism only holds that we should revise our beliefs about an issue in light of disagreement with others whom *we should believe to be our epistemic peers on this issue* rather than that we should revise our beliefs about an issue in light of disagreement with others whom *we do not know are not our epistemic peers on this issue*.³³

the view that a conciliatory view does not apply regarding peer disagreement about moral issues; especially if conciliationism about non-moral issues is independently plausible, as it seems to be; see §1. Thirdly, it is not obvious that counter-examples of exactly the same type as the one that Setiya utilizes to argue against conciliationism about the epistemology of peer disagreement about moral issues present themselves regarding non-moral issues or at least regarding non-moral issues that are not philosophical or religious issues.

³² Setiya (2012, p. 20)

³³ Vavova (2014, p. 305). See also Frances (2014, pp. 47-49).

2.2. Does Conciliationism lead to Moral Skepticism (without leading to Non-Moral Skepticism)?

Some have argued that conciliationism entails epistemological moral skepticism but does not entail epistemological non-moral skepticism.³⁴ The most prominent argument for this view concerns our ability to identify moral experts. There are experts whom we can and should often defer to regarding non-moral issues. And it is relatively easy to independently identify these experts. For instance, we can identify those who are experts about the weather because their predictions in the past have turned out to be correct. And so, for many disagreements about non-moral issues we can figure out whether the experts are on our side because regarding non-moral issues we can all agree about who the experts are on these issues by looking at putative experts' past track record about these kinds of issues. We can then ascertain with whom the experts agree. And we need not revise our beliefs about some issue because some of our epistemic peers about this issue disagree with us if we justifiably believe that the experts are on our side on this issue.

But it seems plausible that we cannot preserve the epistemic status of our *moral beliefs* in light of peer disagreement by coming to justifiably believe that the experts are on our side. For some have argued that, and it seems plausible that, with purely moral issues we cannot identify moral experts because there is no independent check for whose views have latched onto or correctly predicted the lay of the purely moral land in the past; although we can, via an independent check, identify experts about what the consequences of an action or policy would be we cannot, via an independent check, identify experts regarding the purely moral issue of whether these consequences are good or bad and whether we ought to perform an action or undertake a policy that has particular consequences. So, the peer disagreements that we find ourselves in about empirical matters can be rendered epistemically unproblematic for our beliefs about these empirical matters when we know that the experts agree with us about these matters. But the peer disagreements that we find ourselves in about many moral topics in which there is a substantial division of opinion amongst peers cannot be rendered

³⁴ This view is the epistemic analogue of the view that facts about moral disagreement lead to anti-realist consequences about moral metaphysics but facts about non-moral disagreement do not lead to anti-realist consequences about non-moral metaphysics; see Bennigson (1996), Machery et al (2005), Doris and Stich (2005), Doris and Plakias (2008), Rawls (1999, p. 290, p. 301), Mackie (1977, pp. 36-38), and Rowland (forthcoming). For responses to arguments for this view see Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 228), McGrath (2010, p. 64, p. 76), and Fitzpatrick (2014).

epistemically unproblematic for our beliefs about these moral topics in the same way.³⁵ Call this argument for the view that conciliationism leads to moral skepticism without leading to non-moral skepticism *the expertise argument*.

However, *the expertise argument* seems to entail that

No Experts No Knowledge. If we find ourselves in a disagreement about whether p in which there is a substantial division of opinion regarding whether p amongst our epistemic peers about whether p , and we cannot identify via an independent check whom the experts are regarding p , then we do not have justified beliefs about whether p .

And *No Experts No Knowledge* seems to generate (implausibly) skeptical consequences regarding our non-moral beliefs. For instance, Jason Decker and Daniel Groll have argued that *No Experts No Knowledge* entails that neither we nor evolutionary biologists know that the earth is millions of years old. Because we and evolutionary biologists disagree with young earth creationists not only about the age of the earth but also about who counts as an expert about the age of earth. Young earthers believe that their pastors are the experts when it comes to the age of the earth and we believe that evolutionary biologists are the experts when it comes to the age of the earth. And there is no independent check that we can refer to that justifies us in believing that evolutionary biologists are the real experts when it comes to the age of the earth. Because all of the evidence that might seem to show that evolutionary biologists are the real experts when it comes to the age of the earth, such as the fossil record, is consistent with the views of some young earth pastors who believe that this evidence, such as the fossil record, is misleading evidence that was planted by God. And if *No Experts No Knowledge* entails that neither we nor evolutionary biologists know that the earth is millions of years old, then *the expertise argument* does not establish that conciliationism leads to epistemological moral skepticism but not epistemological non-moral skepticism as it aims to.³⁶ (And the fact that the expertise arguments entails *No Experts No Knowledge* and *No Experts No Knowledge*

³⁵ See McGrath (2008, pp. 96-99), Driver (2006), and Cholbi (2007).

³⁶ See Decker and Groll (2013, esp. pp. 142-152).

has such general epistemologically skeptical consequences seems to undermine the expertise argument).³⁷

3. Applying Conciliationism to Beliefs about Specific Moral Issues

As I've discussed, it seems that: (A) our moral beliefs are not insulated from the implications of conciliationism; and (B) conciliationism does not lead to wholesale epistemological moral skepticism. If (A) and (B) hold, there is an interesting issue in applied moral epistemology about the implications of conciliationism for particular moral beliefs. Some have begun to discuss the implications of conciliationism for our beliefs about particular moral issues.

Ben Sherman discusses whether conciliationism entails that those of us who believe that marriage equality—that is the recognition of same-sex marriages—and gender equality are morally right are not epistemically justified in these beliefs given the peer disagreement that we find about these issues. Sherman argues that

We should not take others to be our epistemic peers regarding whether p if

- (a) We have reason to believe that *their beliefs* regarding whether p
 - (i) Are dogmatic or are the result of other dogmatic beliefs;
 - (ii) Are status-quo beliefs; and

³⁷ 1. Even if Decker and Groll's argument fails to undermine *the expertise argument*, it does not seem to me that *the expertise argument* shows that conciliationism leads to *radical* epistemological moral skepticism. This is because, firstly, there does not seem to be moral disagreement (no matter moral peer disagreement) about certain moral claims such as that pain is bad and that killing is sometimes wrong, and so *the expertise argument* could not show that conciliationism entails that we have no moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs at all. Secondly, as I discuss in §4 below, even if we cannot identify moral experts many moral philosophers may justifiably believe that they do not find themselves in peer disagreements about certain topics that they are at the forefront of research regarding. In this case, the combination of *the expertise argument* and conciliationism would not entail that these moral philosophers do not have justified moral beliefs about certain controversial moral issues.

2. A different argument has been made which might seem to be an argument for an asymmetric view of the implications of conciliationism. Some have argued that conciliationism will, or may, have more skeptical implications regarding our moral views than regarding our non-moral views if moral intuitions play a certain key role in justifying our moral beliefs, or play this key role in a particular way; see Besong (2014) and Killoren (2010), cf. Wedgwood (2010). However, these arguments are understood by their authors to be, if successful, *reductios* of views according to which moral intuitions play a certain key role in justifying our moral beliefs

- (iii) Are the result of, or are informed by, other cognitive biases, such as ‘implicit prejudices, misunderstandings of statistics, predictive errors and un-charitable interpretations of positions’; and
- (b) We do not have such reason to believe that *our beliefs* regarding whether *p* instantiate (i-iii).³⁸

And Sherman argues that the beliefs about the moral status of gender and marriage equality that are held by most of those who believe that gender and marriage equality are wrong are beliefs that instantiate (i-iii). But the beliefs about the moral status of gender and marriage equality that are held by most of those of us who believe that gender and marriage equality are right are not beliefs that instantiate (i-iii). So, we should believe that most of those who believe that gender and marriage equality are wrong *are not* our epistemic peers about the moral status of gender and marriage equality. But most of those who believe that gender and marriage equality are right *are* our epistemic peers about this issue. And in this case, peer disagreement about the morality of gender and marriage equality does not undermine the epistemic status of our belief that gender and marriage equality are right because most of our epistemic peers about this issue agree with us.³⁹

However, (i) seems to be true of the beliefs about gender and marriage equality of at least many of us who believe that gender and marriage equality are right: many of us are very dogmatic about the immorality of gender inequality. (ii) does not seem to be a plausible epistemic vice of a belief. For the view that instantiating (ii) is an epistemic vice of a belief would seem to entail that Nietzschean immoralists and egoists can claim an epistemic advantage for their moral beliefs on the basis that they, unlike their opponents, hold radically *contra-status-quo* views.⁴⁰ And this does not seem to be an advantage of these views—even if their radically *contra-status-quo* status is not a disadvantage of these views either. And a more robust case that (iii) holds of most of those who believe that marriage and gender equality are wrong’s beliefs about this issue but that (iii) does not

³⁸ See Sherman (2014, esp. pp. 11-14).

³⁹ See *ibid.* esp. pp. 9-15.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kahane (2011, p. 113).

hold of the beliefs of most of those who believe that marriage and gender equality are right seems to be needed.⁴¹

So, it seems that Sherman fails to show that if conciliationism holds, then peer disagreement about the morality of gender and marriage equality does not undermine the epistemic status of our belief that gender and marriage equality are right. But Sherman's discussion does illuminate our understanding of the kind of considerations that are relevant to carefully considering the implications of conciliationism for the epistemic status of particular moral beliefs that we hold.⁴²

Adam Elga has argued that conciliationism will not have significant implications for very many of our moral beliefs at all. According to Elga, very often moral disagreements are not isolated disagreements about particular issues but are rather nested in disagreements about a variety of related moral and non-moral issues. For instance, pro-choicers don't just disagree with pro-lifers about the morality of abortion; pro-choicers also disagree with pro-lifers about issues such as whether human beings have souls and whether rights are of central ethical importance.⁴³ But according to Elga, in order to judge that another is our epistemic peer about whether p we need to (or should) make an evaluation of this other's epistemic credentials regarding whether p setting aside our particular reasoning

⁴¹ Sherman (2014, pp. 13-14) claims that (iii) holds of most of those who believe that marriage and gender equality are wrong's beliefs about this issue but (iii) does not hold of the beliefs about this issue of most of those who believe that marriage and gender equality are right because most of those who have learned about such cognitive biases hold that marriage and gender equality are right and

Those who have learned about these kinds of failings are more likely to be on guard against them, and those who have regular interactions with those who have such training are more likely to have their errors brought to their attention.

However, some have argued that being aware of cognitive biases, such as being aware of implicit biases, does not in fact reduce one's implicit bias and propensity to treat others in line with such biases (and there is a way in which this shouldn't be too surprising with implicit biases because such biases act implicitly rather than explicitly); see, for instance, Byrne and Tanesini (2015, pp. 1255-1256).

⁴² David Killoren (2010, pp. 20-25) discusses whether conciliationism undermines our justification for believing that slavery is wrong. However, the argument that Killoren discusses for the conclusion that conciliationism does so undermine our justification for this belief relies on the view, which is not, and should not be, part of conciliationism, that the fact that someone whom one does not know to not be one's epistemic peer regarding p disagrees with one regarding p undermines the justification of one's belief regarding whether p in the same way that peer disagreement regarding p does; see §2.2.

⁴³ Elga (2007, p. 493)

about whether p .⁴⁴ And in this case, according to Elga, if A finds herself in a nested disagreement with B about whether p , A should not judge that B is her epistemic peer about whether p because setting aside her particular reasoning about whether p , A should not judge that B is her epistemic peer about whether p ; for instance, according to Elga's view, setting aside their reasoning about the morality of abortion pro-choicers should not judge that pro-lifers are their epistemic peers about the morality of abortion because pro-choicers disagree with pro-lifers about other related issues such as about whether human beings have souls and whether rights are of central ethical importance. So, if very often moral disagreements are nested in this way, then conciliationism will very often have no implications for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs.⁴⁵

However, the nesting of some of our moral, and related non-moral, disagreements often takes place against a background of broad moral agreement. For instance, people who disagree about the morality of abortion agree about the immorality of slavery and torturing and killing the innocent for fun. Furthermore, we often find ourselves in moral disagreements with others with whom we agree about a vast range of moral issues and think are trustworthy and morally insightful people: for instance; we frequently find ourselves in disagreements about the moral status of animals with those with whom we agree about pretty much all other moral issues. And this background of broad agreement is sufficient to make it the case that we can and should judge those with whom we disagree about many moral issues to be our epistemic peers about these issues.⁴⁶ So, Elga does not seem to establish that conciliationism has implications for the epistemic status of only very few of our moral beliefs.

Katia Vavova argues that although conciliationism has implications for our non-fundamental or derivative moral beliefs conciliationism does not have implications for our fundamental moral beliefs. Our fundamental moral beliefs are moral beliefs that are beliefs about moral principles or values that are not derived from other beliefs about moral principles or values; the beliefs that pain is bad, that killing is importantly different

⁴⁴ For instance, in order to judge whether Joe is my epistemic peer about how much we each owe for dinner I should set aside my own reasoning about how much we each owe for dinner: in judging whether Joe is my epistemic peer about how much we each owe for dinner I should just focus on factors that are independent of my current reasoning about how much we each owe for dinner such as Joe's track record with mental math questions.

⁴⁵ Cf. Setiya (2012, p. 18) who argues that Elga's view about these nested cases is incorrect.

⁴⁶ See McGrath (2008, pp. 103-106) and Kornblith (2010, pp. 47-51).

from letting die, that torture is wrong regardless of the consequences, and that it is wrong to cause great harm for no comparable benefit are (for many of us) instances of fundamental moral beliefs. According to Vavova, conciliationism might entail that we should revise some of our views about what we ought to do in a particular situation if we find ourselves in an empirical disagreement about the morally relevant facts of this situation with others whom are our epistemic peers on these empirical matters. But according to Vavova, if A disagrees about the moral status of ϕ -ing with B and this disagreement is the product of a fundamental moral disagreement in moral intuitions or in the moral principles or values that A and B fundamentally or non-derivatively accept, then A will have no positive reason to believe that B is her epistemic peer about the moral status of ϕ -ing. And if A has no positive reason to believe that B is her epistemic peer regarding the moral status of ϕ -ing, conciliationism does not entail that A must revise her beliefs because of the disagreement that she finds herself in with B .⁴⁷

However, suppose that A disagrees about the moral status of ϕ -ing with B , A and B 's disagreement about the moral status of ϕ -ing boils down to a disagreement in fundamental intuitions or to a disagreement in the moral principles that A and B fundamentally accept, A respects B 's moral thinking, and A shares a broad background of moral agreement with B . Cases like this are possible, for instance, disagreements about the moral status of animals that are not nested in very broad disagreements seem to have these features. And in this kind of case it seems that, other things equal, A has positive reason to believe that B is her (approximate) epistemic peer about the moral status of ϕ -ing. (After all, A respects B 's moral thinking in general and finds herself in agreement with B about many other moral issues).⁴⁸ So, *contra* Vavova, conciliationism does seem to

⁴⁷ Vavova (2014, pp. 314-318 and pp. 322-324)

⁴⁸ Cf. Vavova (2014, pp. 322-323 and p. 326). The only reason that I can imagine for holding that when we find ourselves in a fundamental disagreement about the moral status of ϕ -ing with someone whose moral thinking we respect and/or with whom we share a broad background of moral agreement we still have no positive reason to believe that this person is our epistemic peer about the moral status of ϕ -ing is that we should hold the following view:

Peer Ascription Pessimism. For any domain D even if we agree with another about almost every matter in that domain, and believe that they are our epistemic peer regarding almost every matter in that domain, we should not believe that they are (approximately) our epistemic peer on some particular issue $D1$ in that domain if we do not know how they think about $D1$ in particular.

But *Peer Ascription Pessimism* does not seem plausible and does not seem to fit well with conciliationism. To see this, see that *Peer Ascription Pessimism* seems to entail that we should not believe that our friend whom we believe, and should believe, to be our epistemic peer about

have implications for the epistemic status of at least some of our fundamental moral beliefs.

4. Practical Implications of Conciliationism's Impact on the Status of our Moral Beliefs

So, conciliationism has significant implications for the epistemic status of some—and seemingly many—of our moral beliefs. If conciliationism undermines our justification for some of our moral beliefs, this will have practical implications for what we ought to do.

Consider

Epistemic \rightarrow *Metaphysical*. If we are not justified in believing that it is permissible for us to ϕ and/or we must suspend judgement about whether it is permissible for us to ϕ , then it is not permissible for us to ϕ .⁴⁹

Certain cases support *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical*. For instance, suppose that Penny is a police officer who is at a shooting range about to shoot at a target. But Penny is not justified in believing that there is not a cleaner moving around behind the targets who would be very likely hit if Penny took a shot at the target. So, Penny is not justified in believing that it is permissible for her to shoot at the target. But because Penny is not justified in believing that it is permissible for her to shoot it seems that it is also not

mental mathematical questions, is our epistemic peer about how much we each owe for dinner in the restaurant bill calculation case discussed in §1. And this conclusion about that case is both implausible and anathema to conciliationism.

Those who only have one fundamental moral intuition or only make one fundamental moral judgment might seem to have no reason to believe that anyone with whom they disagree about moral issues is their epistemic peer. This might be right. However, few if any find themselves in this situation. Most of us make a range of non-derivative moral judgments. Some of us then search for normative ethical principles that can explain these moral judgments. But if or when we find such a principle that we think best explains these non-derivative moral judgments it does not follow that we no longer make a range of non-derivative moral judgments but rather that we make a range of fundamental moral judgments that we judge to be best explained by a fundamental moral principle. (Vavova also only seems to discuss cases in which we make a range of fundamental moral judgments. For instance, Vavova (2014, p. 314) discusses a case in which *A* and *B* find themselves in a fundamental disagreement about abortion but agree on all other moral matters).

⁴⁹ See Kiesewetter (forthcoming) and Matheson (2016).

permissible for Penny to shoot.⁵⁰ Now if *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* holds, and peer disagreement (due to conciliationism) undermines our justification for believing that many actions, which we believe to be permissible, are permissible, then it is not permissible for us to perform many of the actions that we believe to be permissible. For instance, if peer disagreement (due to conciliationism) undermines non-vegetarians' beliefs that non-vegetarianism is permissible, and *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* holds, then it is not permissible to eat meat.⁵¹

A different practical implication of conciliationism's impact on our moral beliefs involves education. If non-conciliatory responses to peer disagreement about moral issues are not epistemically justified, then it seems that a good case for educational measures to help cultivate conciliatory responses to peer disagreements about moral issues can be made. This case might be strengthened by facts about the (non-epistemic) consequences of steadfast responses to peer disagreements about moral issues in particular. We might think that those who have the most horrific moral views are people who do not give weight to the views that their epistemic peers on moral issues hold. For instance, neo-nazi April Gaede said that the greatest gift that she inherited from her neo-nazi father

was to not give a rip about what anybody else thought. It's what you thought. It's what you really knew in your heart was the right thing to do. It didn't matter if every single person was against you.⁵²

If steadfast responses to disagreements with our epistemic peers on moral issues could be shown to cause more trouble than benefit, this fact combined with the truth of conciliationism would seem to provide a good *prima facie* case for taking measures to precipitate a reduction in such steadfast responses to peer disagreements about moral issues.

⁵⁰ See Harman (2015, p. 58). For discussion of exactly what cases like these can establish see Harman (2015). For a response to one popular objection to principles like *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* see Sepielli (2016).

⁵¹ See Matheson (2016, pp. 126-129). The combination of *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* and conciliationism would seem to entail that we must give almost everything that we earn to charity if we should believe that act-consequentialists are our epistemic peers about whether act-consequentialism holds or not. However, this consequence of *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* may show that *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical* is only plausible if an additional condition is added to the antecedent of *Epistemic* \rightarrow *Metaphysical*, namely, 'and ϕ -ing would not be extremely costly'.

⁵² See Theroux (2013).

Finally, Ben Cross has argued that the bare fact that there is a lot of disagreement between moral philosophers about the applied ethical issues that interest ethics committees and public policy panels has practical implications. Cross argues that this fact of disagreement shows that moral philosophers do not have the status of experts on such moral issues and so should not play the role of experts on ethics committees and public policy panels as they currently do in some countries.⁵³

However, conciliationism may provide us with the resources to argue for a more optimistic conclusion regarding philosophers' credentials as experts on ethics committees and public policy panels. Suppose that the truth of conciliationism establishes that the peer disagreements about the moral issues that interest public policy panels and ethics committees (e.g. euthanasia, cloning, capital punishment, distributive justice) undermines the epistemic justification of most people's moral beliefs about these issues. In this case the only people who may not have the justification of their beliefs about these moral issues undermined due to peer disagreements are those who are at what we might call the 'cutting-edge' of debates about particular moral issues.

To be at the 'cutting-edge' of the debate about a particular moral issue is to have knowledge of all the arguments that have been made regarding that moral issue. Suppose that you are at the 'cutting-edge' of the debate about, for instance, the ethics of human enhancement and that you have an argument regarding the ethics of enhancement that yields a controversial conclusion regarding this moral issue. Further suppose that you have published this argument, and discussed this argument with many others, and that no one has given you a response to this argument that you did not have responses to that they agreed to be reasonable. It may be that in this case you can justifiably judge that you currently do not have any epistemic peers who disagree with you on this controversial moral issue even though you hold a controversial view about this issue.

It might be the case that (a) conciliationism holds, (b) the moral beliefs of many about the moral issues that ethics committees and public policy panels discuss are undermined by the peer disagreements that many find themselves in, but (c) there are some at the 'cutting edge' of debates regarding these moral issues who are justified in believing that

⁵³ See Cross (2016).

they do not find themselves in peer disagreements on these moral issues. If (a), (b), and (c) hold, then those on the ‘cutting-edge’ regarding these issues may in one clear sense have the status of experts on these issues, namely they will be the only people with justified beliefs about these controversial moral topics. So, if conciliationism holds, then—*contra* Cross—facts about moral disagreement may provide a case for the view that moral philosophers *should* play a significant role as experts on public policy panels because for many moral issues moral philosophers may be the only people with justified beliefs about those moral issues.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ There may not, of course, be many—or any—who are at the ‘cutting-edge’ of moral debates and justified in believing that they are not engaged in a peer disagreement in this way. But I see no reason to believe *a priori* that there are not some who are at the ‘cutting edge’ of applied ethical issues and justified in believing that they are not engaged in a peer disagreement in this way; there certainly seem to be some people at the ‘cutting-edge’ and justified in believing that they are not engaged in a peer disagreement in this way about particular debates in, for instance, meta-ethics.

One aspect of the general discussion of the epistemology of peer disagreement that I have not as yet discussed is relevant to assessing the implications of conciliationism for philosophers’ role as experts on public policy panels. Some have plausibly argued that it is not only the existence of *actual* peer disagreement that makes a difference to the beliefs that we ought to have. Some have argued that if one believes that *p* and encounters no actual peer disagreement regarding whether *p*, peer disagreement can still undermine one’s belief about whether *p* if it is the case that there is a close-by possible world in which one encounters peer disagreement regarding whether *p*. For instance, if the only reason why one does not encounter peer disagreement regarding one’s belief that *p* is that one has slaughtered all those who hold dissenting views, peer disagreement still undermines one’s justification for believing that *p*; see Kelly (2005, p. 181). And it may be that the fact that a recently deceased brilliant philosopher would have disagreed with you about some issue if they hadn’t died undermines the epistemic status of your belief about this matter in the same way that actual existing peer disagreement does; see Ballantyne (2014).

However, the scenario that I have sketched regarding those who are on the ‘cutting edge’ of a particular issue in applied ethics and are justified in believing that they are not engaged in a peer disagreement regarding this issue is plausibly not quite like either of these scenarios. For the scenario that I sketched was one in which someone has an argument for a controversial view about a particular applied ethical issue but has aired this view in print and in many other circumstances and has not found a response that they have not been able to parry in a way that has been seen to be reasonable by all concerned. Perhaps some brilliant dead philosopher would disagree with someone at the ‘cutting edge’ of an issue in this way if they were still around. But if conciliationism entails that the fact that someone who would have been your epistemic peer about *p* might have disagreed with you about whether *p* if they were around can be sufficient to render your otherwise strongly justified view regarding whether *p* no longer justified, then conciliationism would seem to implausibly lead to quite general epistemological skepticism. This is because for any view that one might have about anything a great dead philosopher might have disagreed with one about this issue if they were around. And conciliationism, if it is to be plausible cannot entail such a general skepticism; see *supra* notes 9-11 and 17.

5. Conclusion

Contra many including Sarah McGrath and Kieran Setiya, conciliationism does not seem to have implications for the epistemic status of our moral beliefs that are radically different from the implications that it has for the epistemic status of our non-moral beliefs. Conciliationism does seem to have significant implications for the epistemic status of at least some—and seemingly many—of our moral beliefs about controversial moral issues (such as beliefs about the permissibility of eating animals and beliefs about the moral status of abortion). But there is much more work in applied moral epistemology to be done to ascertain which of our moral beliefs—and exactly whose moral beliefs—are not justified if conciliationism holds. And it seems that conciliationism has significant practical implications for what we all ought to do, the education policies that we ought to implement, and the role that philosophers ought to play in public policy-making.

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