Moral Disagreement and Moral Genealogy: Two Sources of Empirically-Based
Epistemological Challenges to Robust Realism

by
Alexander Pho

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Philosophy
(Honors Associate)

Presented June 4, 2018
Commencement June 2018
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alexander Pho for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Philosophy presented on June 4, 2018. Title: Moral Disagreement and Moral Genealogy: Two Sources of Empirically-Based Epistemological Challenges to Robust Realism.

Abstract approved:_____________________________________________________

Allen Thompson

I defend robust realism from arguments that raise epistemological challenges to it based on considerations about either moral disagreement or the genealogy of our moral beliefs. The first argument is the “Argument from Conciliationism,” which contends that the moral disagreements that obtain between moral peers give us reason to believe that we lack any (positive) moral knowledge. After showing why that argument fails, I consider a second disagreement-based argument: Justin Horn’s “Reliability Argument from Disagreement” (RAD), which contends that moral disagreements undercut the reliability of our moral belief forming methods for tracking realistic moral facts. I argue that, besides facing empirical issues, the RAD reduces to Genealogical Debunking Arguments (GDAs), the third kind of argument I consider. GDAs contend that the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs undercuts their epistemic credentials. I argue that GDAs reduce to a priori worries about the very possibility of beings like us achieving knowledge of the causally impotent facts posited by robust realism. I conclude that no reason to have epistemological worries about robust realism over and above the reasons stemming from a priori epistemological
worries about the view arises from empirical considerations about moral disagreement and the genealogy of our moral beliefs.

Key Words: philosophy, metaethics, robust realism, disagreement, genealogy, debunking

Corresponding e-mail address: phoa@oregonstate.edu
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APPROVED:

Allen A. Thompson, Mentor, representing the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion

Jonathan M. Kaplan, Committee Member, representing the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion

Benjamin A. White, Committee Member, representing the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion

Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Alexander Pho, Author
Acknowledgements

Thanks to Allen Thompson, Jonathan Kaplan, and Ben White for the many hours each of them have dedicated to helping me complete this honors thesis as my thesis committee members. I am deeply grateful for all of the time I was able to spend with each of them discussing the contents of this thesis (as well as philosophical topics unrelated to my thesis), especially when my thoughts were particularly muddled, and for the generous amount of written feedback they provided me to help with making needed revisions. Undoubtedly this thesis would be nowhere near as good as it is without their help, and undoubtedly my growth as a scholar during my time as an undergraduate is in large part a consequence of the influence each of them has had on me. Allen Thompson and Jonathan Kaplan are both excellent professors of philosophy, and I hope to eventually become a professor who treats his students as well as they treat theirs. Ben White is a very talented up-and-coming scholar who I’m sure will go on to make many great contributions in academic philosophy, and he is someone I am fortunate to be able to call a good friend of mine.

Thanks also are owed to a few of my fellow cohort members from the 2017 Colorado Summer Seminar in Philosophy. David Mwakima and Jacob Zimbelman provided helpful written feedback on my writing sample for my graduate school writing sample, most of the contents of which were used for chapter 4 of this thesis. On top of having helped improve this thesis, their feedback helped propel me to success in my graduate school applications. Amit Singh has gone out of his way many times to help me obtain scholarly resources that are not accessible via the scholarly databases I readily have access to. Research for this thesis was greatly facilitated by these efforts of his. And Leo Santoso has repeatedly helped reinvigorate my drive to do philosophy with his constant encouragement. His support in helping me manage my angst during the graduate school application process is especially appreciated. I am grateful to all four of these individuals for their help and for their friendship.

Thanks also to the editors of *Areté: The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Rutgers University*, for deeming my essay “Locating the “Cosmic Coincidence Challenge” to Robust Realism”—the writing sample which I used for my graduate school applications (and much of the contents of which were used for chapter 4 of this thesis)—fit for publication in the 2018 edition of their journal, and for the helpful written feedback on that essay they provided me to help facilitate revisions of it.

Last, but definitely not least, thanks to my parents, Cheng Khun and Sun Leng Pho, for supporting my decision to pursue a career in academic philosophy. Their unwavering belief in me is the deepest expression of love I could ever hope to receive.
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Chapter 1, Introduction

Introduction

This undergraduate thesis is a work of metaethics. More specifically, it is a partial defense of a metaethical view known as “robust realism.” The defense is a partial one since I only consider a few of the potential challenges one might mount against robust realism. The specific challenges I consider are epistemological challenges that purport to be grounded in empirical facts about moral disagreement and the genealogy of our moral beliefs.

What does all of that mean, and why should anyone care to read this thesis? Answering the first part of that question will require unpacking the various philosophical terms of art mentioned above, and the bulk of this introductory chapter will be dedicated to doing just that. But before launching into the more detailed unpacking, I will take a moment to briefly try and answer the second half of that question satisfactorily by first putting the statements in the first paragraph in more layperson-friendly terms.

The view defended here maintains that there are moral facts—i.e. facts about what things are good, bad, just, unjust, virtuous, vicious, should be done, should not be done, and other related notions—and that those facts are ultimately objective in the sense that (to be further elaborated on later) they are ultimately not of our own making in any significant sense. The defense is only a partial one in that I do not make an attempt to take on every possible serious challenge. My focus is on challenges that aim to show that there are insurmountable challenges to our coming to have knowledge or epistemically justified\(^1\) beliefs about the sorts of moral facts I claim exist. These

\(^1\) Epistemic justification is the sort of justification an agent has for holding a belief setting aside all practical considerations that might give the agent “practical justification” for holding a belief, and an agent can only acquire it for a belief by being in the right sort of relationship to things which suggest that the belief is true. To illustrate the
challenges purport to establish that what we have good reason to believe about some of the sorts of moral disagreements people engage in, and about the causal origins of our moral beliefs, gives us reason to doubt that any of our current moral beliefs amount to knowledge or are even epistemically justified, and that the prospects are bleak that we could ever have moral knowledge or epistemically justified moral beliefs.

So why should anyone care about the sort of project I pursue in this thesis? The best answer I can think of is that moral facts are a species of normative facts: they are a type of fact about what an agent ought to do in the sense of what they have reason to do, or what agents ought to do in the reason-implying-sense. Since moral facts have normative import, we human agents should take care to find out what we can about such facts. In particular, we should take care to figure out the answer to two specific questions: Do moral facts even exist? And are the moral facts ultimately fixed by something else other than merely our opinions; that is, are they “stance-independent” facts? For even if learning that we should answer both of these questions affirmatively by itself would not give us any positive information about what our moral obligations are, it would give us two pieces of information that would give us good reason to believe that we are right to take further moral inquiry for the purpose of figuring out that yet-to-be-discovered positive information to be a serious and worthwhile project we should all (to at least some extent) engage in. These are (i) moral facts exist, and (ii) what they are for each agent is not ultimately a function of what she,

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difference between the two types of justification, imagine a scenario where an agent might have reason to trick herself into believing that her evidence supports p even when she is aware that that evidence clearly entails not p because believing that p is necessary for her to carry out an important task (and believing she has good evidence for p is necessary for her to actually believe that p). In that scenario, the agent might be “practically justified” in getting herself to believe p even though the belief that p is epistemically unjustified for her.

2 Perhaps, however, future metaethical research may well uncover that affirmative answers to those two questions would give us positive information about what our moral obligations are. See McPherson (2012) for arguments for why increased engagement with metaethical issues would result in a theoretical boon for normative ethics.
or whatever community she belongs to, wants them to be;\(^3\) instead, the moral facts are the same for each of us. The view of moral facts I am arguing for entails that those two things are true, and so it supports the view that each of us has reason to engage in further moral inquiry to gain more positive knowledge and understanding about what our substantive moral responsibilities are.

In addition, the epistemological challenges posed by considerations about moral disagreement and the causal origins of our moral beliefs, I believe, are interesting in their own right. Those challenges are also seen by many people, including both philosophers and non-philosophers, as particularly stiff ones for the sort of view about moral facts I defend. And they are perhaps the only two kinds of empirically grounded epistemological challenges that confront robust realists. Thus they are perhaps the only two kinds of epistemological challenges to robust realism that put forth something other than \textit{a priori} considerations as grounds for worrying about how we might have knowledge or epistemically justified beliefs about entities we do not have causal contact with. So if I pulled off a successful response to them, I would have allayed a good deal of the epistemological concerns over robust realism.

What about those who think that other things are much more important than morality? Is there any reason for them to spend time reading this thesis? There are two sorts of people who would ask these questions. The first is someone who, while perhaps concerned with what moral reasons for action she has, thinks that (at least some) self-interested reasons ultimately always exceed moral reasons in terms of normative import. Such a person might wonder why she should think otherwise. Unfortunately, a response to that sort of person would require developing a comprehensive theory of the different kinds of normative reasons there are and how they might be

\footnote{Here I am assuming that the act of merely introspecting to see what one wishes the moral facts would be, or checking the opinions of the members of one’s immediate community about what the moral facts are, is not the sort of serious moral inquiry that many of us would defend as a worthwhile project.}
weighed against one another when their directives clash, and it is outside of the purview of this thesis project to offer such an account. The best I can do is say that I am disposed to believe that even if the normative import of moral facts is not categorical, their import is sufficiently great that it is worth considering whether there are any self-interested reasons that ultimately always exceed their normative import.

The second person who might ask those questions is someone who has no care at all for morality. To such a person, there is not much, or anything really, I could say briefly to change their mind. I can only register my belief that they are significantly mistaken about the sorts of things they ought to care about.

Having addressed why someone should care to read on, I will now begin my more detailed breakdown of the statements in the first paragraph of this introductory section, and try to provide a sense of what readers should expect in this undergraduate thesis.

1. What is Metaethics?

Since this is a work of metaethics, we should start with an explanation of what metaethics is. Metaethics is the subfield of philosophy that is concerned with questions about the nature of what goes on in our moral practices. Such questions include, among others: What are we doing when we make claims with moral content? If moral claims purport to represent moral facts, how is it that we know any moral facts (if we do know any)? And if there are moral facts, what are their features, and determines what the moral facts are? These questions, respectively, are about the semantics of moral discourse, the epistemology of moral facts, and the metaphysics of moral facts, and these subjects comprise the broad categories of things that concern metaethicists. Different metaethical views offer different answers to each of these sorts of questions.
The sorts of questions metaethics is concerned with distinguishes it from the nearby subfields of normative ethics and applied ethics. Normative ethics is concerned with substantive claims about what the correct standards are for assessing whether something—usually an act or character trait—is morally good, bad, virtuous, vicious, etc. and why those things have the particular moral status they do. Applied ethics is the branch of normative ethics that is concerned with identifying the implications of the sorts of facts uncovered through normative ethical theorizing for particular cases, and identifying the course of action we should take in those particular cases.

To help illustrate the contrast between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics, consider the proposition that *infanticide is morally impermissible because it results in the killing of an innocent sentient being*. That proposition is both a normative ethical and applied ethical proposition because it makes a claim about a moral standard for assessing the moral status of an action (i.e. the standard that maintains that it is immoral to kill innocent sentient beings) and a claim about the implications of that standard for a particular case (namely, infanticide). The claim that that proposition is true (if it is true) stance-independently, however, is a metaethical claim; it is a claim *about* that normative ethical and applied ethical claim. Metaethical claims themselves do not contain any substantive moral content, though they have substantive moral implications. For example, consider the claim defended by metaethical error theorists that our moral practices are guilty of a mistaken presupposition, namely, that there are truth-makers for moral claims that give those claims truth values. The truth of the error theorist’s metaethical claim would result in all substantive moral claims being neither true nor false. For example, the error theorist’s metaethical claim entails that the moral proposition that *infanticide* is morally impermissible is neither true nor false. Another example would be the claim defended by subjectivist metaethical
views that the truth-value of a moral proposition for any particular agent is a function of some set of her attitudes or dispositions of approval or disapproval toward that proposition. As that claim is usually construed, it entails that if an agent has some sort of approval-like attitude toward a moral proposition, then that proposition is true for her (in some sense). 4

2. Robust Realism

The metaethical view I will be defending in the chapters to come has come to be known in the metaethical literature as robust realism. 5 This view can be characterized as one that is committed to the following theses:

Cognitivism: Moral claims are assertoric; they are intended to state that certain things are the case, and so can be either true or false.

Non-Skepticism: Not all positive first-order (i.e. normative ethical and applied ethical) moral claims are false, and at least some of our positive moral beliefs amount to knowledge and are epistemically justified.

Stance-Independence: The truth value of a moral proposition does not ultimately depend on the attitudes taken toward or responses had about it by any agent (actual or hypothetical).

Non-Naturalism: Moral facts are not reducible to any natural or “supernatural”,7 non-moral facts. They are irreducibly normative facts, and so are a kind of non-natural fact.

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4 Some philosophers have argued that the moral “non-neutrality” of metaethics, in the sense of metaethical views having substantive moral implications, gives us reason to doubt that there is any meaningful distinction to be made between metaethics and normative ethics. The most prominent of these philosophers to have done so it seems are Ronald Dworkin (1996; 2011) and Matthew H. Kramer (2009), whose efforts to collapse the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics have largely been for the purpose of rebutting anti-realist metaethical views (e.g. error theory). While there are parts of Dworkin and Kramer’s views that I am sympathetic with, I am going to set aside consideration of their views in this thesis.

5 See Shafer-Landau (2003), Huemer (2005), FitzPatrick (2008), and Enoch (2011) for a representative sample of some of the most prominent works defending robust realism.

6 Positive moral claims are ones that attribute a moral property to something. It is these sorts of claims, construed as attributing moral properties that exist stance-independently, that metaethical anti-realists take to be false. Someone who is a more thoroughgoing moral skeptic, however, will want to establish that not even our negative moral claims (i.e. those claims about what does not have a certain moral property) are justified.

7 A supernatural fact would be something like a fact about the desires of some deity. While one might construe supernatural facts as a kind of non-natural fact, robust realism should be viewed as maintaining that moral facts are not reducible to supernatural facts.
A few of clarifying comments are worth making.

First, while my characterization of robust realism is not totally idiosyncratic, it should be noted that some philosophers characterize robust realism as a strictly metaphysical or ontological thesis. Thus they take robust realism to be committed just to the two metaphysical theses of the four: Stance-Independence and Non-Naturalism. For these philosophers, the falsity of Cognitivism and Non-Skepticism would not falsify what they consider to be the robust realist’s view properly construed.

I take no issue with the narrower characterization of robust realism favored by those philosophers. My reason for attributing commitments to a semantic thesis (Cognitivism) and an epistemological thesis (Non-Skepticism) to robust realism is not that I believe that the plausibility of the metaphysical theses depends entirely on the plausibility of the semantic and epistemological theses. Rather, I do so merely to facilitate my presentation of and response to the arguments to be considered in the chapters to come. Those arguments target Non-Skepticism in particular, and while they could be construed so as to be a threat to robust realism’s metaphysical theses (insofar as they are a threat to Non-Skepticism), their immediate implications are only epistemological. Were I to construe robust realism as a strictly metaphysical thesis, I would need to repeatedly qualify that while, strictly speaking, the success of those arguments would not falsify robust realism, it would show that robust realists have a theoretically unattractive commitment to unknowable facts. On the broader construal of robust realism as also having built-in semantic and epistemological commitments, I can save the reader from having to keep that qualification in mind as they read; they can simply deem robust realism to be false if any of the arguments I respond to

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8 See Enoch (2011) and Kahane (2013).
actually succeeds despite my efforts to undercut them. And doing so seems fair since in practice pretty much no one is willing to defend the metaphysical theses of robust realism once they have already given up on the possibility of our having knowledge of the facts those theses posit, even if our inability to acquire knowledge of those facts does not strictly entail their nonexistence. Readers who take issue with the broader construal of robust realism I will be working with, however, can feel free to read the arguments considered here as aiming to show that robust realism merely has some theoretically unattractive aspects as opposed to the view being false. None of the arguments I make hinge on readers not reading the arguments in that way.

Second, it would be worth saying a bit about the Stance-Independence condition. Stance-independence does not entail that the opinions of agents about moral matters cannot have any sort of effect on the content of their moral responsibilities. For example, Stance-Independence can allow that certain moral facts can result in different directives for different agents in different cases as a result of differences in social contexts. Were it a moral fact that agents have a *prima facie* moral responsibility to show an appropriate level of respect to other agents in interpersonal interactions, the content of the moral directives this moral fact would result in for any particular agent would plausibly be sensitive to what the prevailing (pretty much arbitrary) practices concerning how one appropriately shows respect is in the social setting the agent finds herself in. If prevailing opinion establishes the practice that in the agent’s setting one should shake hands with someone when meeting them for the first time, then the fact that the agent should be respectful in her interpersonal interactions results in the directive to shake hands when meeting someone for the first time. Conversely, if the prevailing opinion is that shaking hands when meeting them for the first time is an act of disrespect, then it won’t result in that directive. What Stance-Independence does not allow is that the existence of the underlying moral facts that could
potentially result in different directives for different agents are somehow dependent on the attitudes taken toward them by any agent. Thus for example, while one may be able to conceive of scenarios where the arbitrary opinions of agents might affect the content of its directives, the moral fact (if it is a fact) captured in the proposition that it is (at least prima facie) morally impermissible to harm sentient beings merely for entertainment would not depend on any agent’s attitudes toward it for its existence. In other words, Stance-Independence would not allow an agent to shake free of her moral responsibility not to harm sentient beings merely for entertainment merely by (for example) having the desire to do such harm for fun.

Third, readers might be curious about how they are supposed to conceive of the irreducibly normative, non-natural facts robust realism posits. What is an irreducibly normative fact? And in what sense are the irreducibly normative facts posited by robust realism non-natural? These questions are notoriously difficult to answer at all satisfactorily, and I fear that I am not at all prepared to do a better job answering them than others have. Nonetheless, I’ll try to answer them in a way that is at least satisfactory for the purpose of the project I am pursuing here. I’ll start with the first of these two questions.

Normative facts are expressed in claims using normative or evaluative concepts. Normative or evaluative concepts are those that (according to cognitivists about normative judgments) attribute a normative or evaluative property to something; a normative fact attributes a normative or evaluative property to something. Examples of these terms include good, bad, justified,

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9 I won’t be making sharp distinctions between normative and evaluative terms; I assume that value facts are reason-giving, so that seems to collapse any significant distinction one might make between the two. For the most part, however, I’ll stick to the use of the term “normative” rather than “evaluative” going forward so as to prevent confusion.
unjustified, right, wrong, and other similar ones. Robust realists, as non-naturalists about normative facts, maintain that normative facts are irreducible in the sense that normative concepts and the properties those concepts pick out cannot be reduced to any non-normative concepts or properties. Thus for robust realists, the concept of goodness cannot be analyzed into any non-normative concepts such as “desirable,” or “desired by the fully non-normatively informed,” and the property of goodness is not reducible to the properties expressed by those non-normative concepts. Normative facts are thus a *sui generis* sort of fact for robust realists.

As for the second question, unfortunately, I do not have much of characterizations to offer of the sense in which the facts robust realism posits are non-natural except negative ones since I am personally not very sure about what positive characterizations of those facts would serve to make the distinction(s) between robust realism and nearby metaethical views, namely, the sort of or non-naturalistic “non-metaphysical cognitivism” defended most notably by Derek Parfit and T.M. Scanlon, very precise. One negative characterization is that the properties countenanced by the irreducibly normative facts robust realism posits do not reduce to natural properties; natural properties are all non-normative properties according to robust realists. Thus, to reuse the example from the previous paragraph, the property of goodness is not reducible to the natural property of

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10 There are also what “thick” normative concepts: normative concepts that are also partially descriptive concepts, and so attribute both normative and descriptive properties to something. An example of such a concept would be “honest” when used as an evaluative term of praise, as it attributes the property of being truthful to the evaluated object.

11 Some philosophers think that the inability to characterize normative properties in purely non-normative language would make them unobjectionably mysterious, and so the commitment to the irreducibility of normative properties counts as a strike against the plausibility of robust realism. It is outside the purview of this thesis to address such concern, though I am compelled to register my view that worries about mysteriousness seem to merely bottom out in worries that we presently do not have good reasons to think that irreducibly normative properties exist. For why are we not worried that non-normative properties cannot be described in purely *normative* language? It seems precisely to be because we believe ourselves to have good reason for thinking non-normative properties exist.

being desired.\textsuperscript{13} Another negative characterization is that moral facts are abstract in the sense that they do not have a spatiotemporal location and are causally impotent. These characterizations get us some way to grasping how robust realistic moral facts are non-natural facts. But a positive characterization of what makes a non-natural fact’s existence “metaphysically robust” as opposed to “non-ontological,” as non-metaphysical cognitivists have characterized the existence of the non-natural moral facts they posit, would be needed to helpfully distinguish robust realism from non-metaphysical cognitivism.

We can set aside the problem of how to distinguish robust realism from non-metaphysical cognitivism, however, because the skeptical challenges I shall consider plausibly would saddle both views with problems. All realist views seem to be vulnerable to the same sorts of arguments from disagreement (or at least to the one’s I shall consider here). And since pretty much all non-naturalistic metaethical views are committed to moral facts being causally impotent, they will both be under threat from genealogical debunking arguments.\textsuperscript{14}

\section*{3. Chapter Previews}

I close this chapter with brief previews of what to expect in the chapters to come.

\subsection*{3.1. Chapter 2 Preview}

\footnotetext[13]{One might wonder what a natural property is supposed to be. The project of what the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a natural property are is as notoriously difficult as determining what those conditions are for non-natural facts. It is sufficient for our purposes here, however, to think of natural properties as those that are ineliminable from the correct causal explanations of empirical phenomena which the various disciplines in the natural and social sciences are attempting to uncover.}

\footnotetext[14]{Readers might be wondering why I chose to defend robust realism as opposed to non-metaphysical cognitivism if I couldn’t think of a positive characterization of robust realism that would make it a clearly distinct view. There are two reasons why. The first is that I’m not sure how things are supposed to exist in a “non-ontological” sense. The second is that even if some sense can be made of non-ontological existence, it seems to me that non-metaphysical non-naturalism would still be subject to the same worries as its robust counterpart, and so there seems to be no upside to taking on its metaphysical commitments (or lack thereof).}
The focus of chapter 2 will be what I call the “Argument from Conciliationism.” The argument’s aim is to establish that considerations about disagreement between moral peers gives us good reason to doubt that we have any positive first-order moral knowledge. I argue that the Argument from Conciliationism is beset by both empirical and theoretical issues. The empirical issues stem from the implausibility of there being the sort of disagreement that would need to obtain over every moral proposition if the Argument from Conciliationism is to succeed, namely disagreements between moral peers wherein the parties are evenly, or nearly evenly split. The theoretical issues stem from the implausibility of pretty much any agent being able to encounter a moral peer disagreement with whom would rationally necessitate that she suspends all of their moral judgments.

3.2. Chapter 3 Preview

Disagreement based challenges remain the focus of chapter 3, but the specific argument under consideration shifts from the Argument from Conciliationism to Justin Horn’s “Reliability Argument from Disagreement.” That argument aims to show that the existence of widespread disagreement of a certain kind and scope would undercut the reliability of our best method of moral inquiry for tracking robust realistically construed moral facts and ultimately leave us in a position where none of our moral beliefs were epistemically justified. As with the Argument from Conciliationism, I argue that the Reliability Argument from Disagreement is also beset by both empirical and theoretical issues. The empirical issues stem from the implausibility of there being the sort of widespread disagreement that the argument needs to obtain in order to go through. The theoretical issues stem from the dependency of the Reliability Argument from Disagreement on considerations appealed to by Genealogical Debunking Arguments. I contend that that dependency
results in the Reliability Argument from Disagreement reducing to Genealogical Debunking Arguments.

3.3. Chapter 4 Preview

Chapter 4 is focused on Genealogical Debunking Arguments. These arguments aim to show that the causal genealogy of each of our moral beliefs renders them all epistemically suspect. The thought is that the causal genealogies of each of our moral beliefs fails to give us a reason to think that these beliefs are truth-tracking, if moral facts are robust realistically construed. Thus the only way our moral beliefs might be true is out of sheer luck—the truth of any of our moral beliefs would be a “Cosmic Coincidence,” as it has been metaphorically put. Since beliefs that are only merely accidentally true neither amount to knowledge nor are epistemically justified, proponents of Genealogical Debunking Arguments maintain that the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs undercuts their epistemic credentials.

There is actually another argument that attempts to show that our beliefs about robust realistically construed moral facts could only be correct merely accidentally, but it does not rely on empirical considerations in the way Genealogical Debunking Arguments do. I call that argument the “Argument from Causal Impotence.” Based on the Benacerraf-Field Challenge to Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics, the Argument from Causal Impotence aims to establish on \textit{a priori} grounds that in principle we could not have a method of epistemic access to the causally impotent facts posited by robust realists that would ensure that our beliefs about them were truth-tracking because of the causal impotence of those facts.

I argue that Genealogical Debunking Arguments ultimately reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence. The empirical considerations adduced by Genealogical Debunking Arguments
thus do not give us independent reason to have epistemological worries about robust realism over and above the \textit{a priori} considerations adduced by the Argument from Causal Impotence.

\textbf{3.4. Chapter 5 Preview}

The conclusion I eventually reach is that the empirical considerations adduced by the three arguments I consider ultimately do not give us independent bases for epistemological worries about robust realism. Rather, their apparent independent epistemic significance stems from lingering \textit{a priori} worries about the possibility of achieving knowledge of the sorts of causally impotent moral facts posited by robust realism. Thus I suggest that the best thing robust realists can do going forward is to develop positive accounts of how we might have non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. Only with such an account on hand would they be able to allay \textit{a priori} worries about how we might achieve knowledge of those facts, as well as the apparently empirically grounded worries that, I claim, are parasitic on those \textit{a priori} worries.
Chapter 2, The Argument from Conciliationism

Introduction

Many apparent moral disagreements are not really ultimately moral disagreements, but disagreements over non-moral facts. For example, two people might agree on the normative moral theory of preference utilitarianism, but disagree about whether implementing single-payer healthcare would actually maximize preference satisfaction. The disagreement of these interlocutors is not plausibly seen as one over what morality requires since, were both interlocutors to agree about what set of non-moral facts obtains in the actual state of the world, their judgments about whether implementation of single-payer healthcare is morally obligatory would converge. Rather, the disagreement should be seen as ultimately about what non-moral facts actually obtain.

Other moral disagreements occur even when all parties to a disagreement agree about the non-moral facts because at least one party to the disagreement arrived at their belief irrationally. Our two preference utilitarians, for example, could agree that survey results show that single-payer healthcare maximizes preference satisfaction, agree that these results are reliable, yet disagree about whether these results speak in favor of implementing single-payer healthcare because one of them either is being procedurally irrational (i.e. they made an inferential mistake in determining what their beliefs deductively entail or inductively support), or because (say) their deep hatred of single-payer healthcare causes them to develop a bias that makes them irrational when it comes to matters regarding healthcare.

Still other moral disagreements are the result of it actually being indeterminate what the correct view to hold about the matter under dispute is. Cases involving vague concepts are examples of such cases. Two preference utilitarians might agree that they ought to donate some
percentage of their income to a particular charity, but end up disagreeing about the minimum percentage that is enough to fulfill their moral responsibilities because of the vagueness of the concept “enough” in the context of donations to charities. The vagueness in that concept is, at least in part, a result of variation in particulars of different cases that render general principles or rule unable to provide a determinate verdict about the exact percentage that is actually enough in any given case.

Disagreements of any of the sorts just described, all can agree, pose no threat to epistemic credentials of our moral beliefs. For in such disagreements, at least one party has good reason to discount the evidential weight of the disagreement of their opponent(s). Plausibly, however, not all actual moral disagreements are of those sorts. In other words, we have good reason to suspect that there are some actual moral disagreements that occur despite indeterminacy not obtaining, and all of the parties to the disagreements being equally informed of the non-moral facts, equally procedural rational, and not unduly biased in favor of their disputed belief. For example, a preference utilitarian and a non-consequentialist might agree that under certain circumstances lying is the only way one can prevent a deranged murderer from bringing about great harms, yet they still might disagree about whether lying is morally permissible (or obligatory) in such circumstances because of differences in views about what is determinative of the moral status of lying. Such moral disagreements ultimately bottom out in contradictory propositional attitudes—the usually being beliefs or intuitions—held by the disagreeing parties toward the moral proposition(s) under dispute. We can call these moral disagreements fundamental moral disagreements.

Many believe that we have strong evidence that widespread fundamental moral disagreement occurs both across and within cultures and across historical eras in the actual world.
Still others believe that if we do not yet have strong evidence that such widespread disagreement obtains in the actual world, we have good enough evidence to be epistemically justified in believing that it would obtain in idealized conditions. Numerous authors have argued that such disagreement poses an empirically grounded worry for metaethical views like robust realism—i.e. metaethical views that take moral facts to be ultimately stance-independently determined. Some of these arguments defend the epistemological claim that, assuming that moral facts must take on realist features if they actually exist, the pervasiveness of fundamental moral disagreements defeats our epistemic justification either for some set of our first-order moral beliefs, or all of our first-order moral beliefs, and so entails some sort of moral skepticism. Other arguments from disagreement aim to show that a proper understanding of the nature of moral disagreements should lead us to believe the metaphysical claim that there are no moral facts, or at least not any stance-independent ones.

In this chapter and the next, my aim is to defend moral knowledge on a robust realistic view of moral facts from epistemological arguments from disagreement that purport to establish that, in light of what we ought to believe about the sort of fundamental moral disagreement that obtains, we all ought to take a skeptical view of all of their first-order moral judgments—an epistemological view I shall refer to as radical moral skepticism—if moral facts must take on the features robust realists’ metaphysical theses claim they have. While my arguments likely have implications for the plausibility of metaphysical arguments from disagreement that depend on the success of the epistemological arguments from disagreement considered here, I shall not be concerned with spelling out those implications in this chapter.

15 Some prominent examples include Mackie (1977, pp. 36-38), Doris and Plakias (2008), and Leiter (2014).
I will be focusing on two epistemological arguments from disagreement in particular. In this chapter, my concern will be with an argument that makes use of the principle of Conciliationism, which has been the subject of much recent debate in the general epistemology of disagreement literature. I shall call that argument the “Argument from Conciliationism.” My reason for focusing on this argument is that Conciliationism aspires to be a domain-general view about the epistemological consequences of being confronted with disagreement. Thus exploring the possibility of Conciliationism entailing that one ought to adopt radical moral skepticism in the face of fundamental moral disagreement in particular should be of interest to those working in moral epistemology. In the next chapter, my focus will be on Justin Horn’s recently developed Reliability Argument from Disagreement. My reason for focusing on this argument is that it is put forth as an argument that is supposed to succeed where the Argument from Conciliationism fails. Given that that is what Horn intended for the argument, it is worth considering it together with the Argument from Conciliationism.

In what follows, I will argue that the Argument from Conciliationism fails both because of empirical issues and because of theoretical issues. The empirical issues, as one might have guessed, have to do with it being very implausible that the sort of disagreement the argument relies on actually obtains. The theoretical issues have to do with the implausibility of any agent being able to encounter moral peers disagreement with whom would rationally necessitate becoming a radical moral skeptic.

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16 Horn develops this argument in Horn (2017).
Here is how I will proceed. In §1, I present the Argument from Conciliationism, breaking down its various parts and the concepts at work in it. In §2, I begin to mount my objections against the argument, laying out both the empirical and theoretical issues in turn. In §3, I conclude.

1. The Argument from Conciliationism

1.1. Breakdown of the Argument

1.1.1. Conciliationism

Conciliationism is a view about how one ought to revise one’s belief in some \( p \) in the face of peer disagreement about whether it is the case that \( p \). Providing an uncontentious formulation of what Conciliationism prescribes is difficult since several formulations of Conciliationism are currently on offer in the literature among proponents of the view, and it is not entirely clear that there are no major disagreements on important details among these proponents.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, David Christensen, a leading defender of Conciliationism, admits in a recent article that Conciliationists still have a long way to go before they are able to prescribe precise levels of belief revision for different sorts of peer disagreement.\(^{18}\) Nonetheless, for our purposes here, we can draw on the shared core idea behind the various extant formulations of the view, and on considerations about what moral skeptics need out of Conciliationism for an argument employing it as a premise to get them what they want to formulate a working Conciliationist principle. In what follows, then, I will understand Conciliationism as the following view:

**Conciliationism:** Since one must weigh the belief of a disagreeing peer equally to one’s own, if one has good reason to believe that one’s peers are equally, or nearly equally, split over what the correct belief about \( p \) is, the uniquely epistemically rational response to peer


\(^{18}\) Christensen (2011, p. 17).
disagreement about \( p \) is to become skeptical about \( p \)—in other words, one ought to become agnostic about \( p \).\(^{19}\)

Some philosophers have defended Conciliationism and attempted to show that the principle entails that we should suspend belief about controversial moral matters in particular.\(^{20}\) My concern here, however, is whether one can successfully argue from Conciliationism to \textit{radical} moral skepticism. Thus I shall not be concerned with showing that any particular moral belief survives the skeptical threat of Conciliationism, but rather the claim that at least \textit{not all} of our moral beliefs would be undercut by Conciliationism.\(^{21}\)

The key to getting radical moral skepticism out of Conciliationism is to establish that these three propositions are true:

- (C1) We ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreements always amount to peer disagreements.
- (C2) Conciliationism is true.
- (C3) We ought to believe that there is fundamental moral disagreement concerning every moral proposition, and opinions amongst the parties to these disagreements are evenly, or nearly evenly, split.\(^{22}\)

\(^{19}\) This formulation of Conciliationism is more “coarse-grained” in the sense that it takes on an all-or-nothing conception of beliefs rather than a conception of belief that maintains that beliefs can possess different degrees of credence. Nothing in the arguments that follow, however, hinges on my coarse-grained formulation of the Conciliationism principle; the coarse-grained formulation is merely for ease of explication. One can substitute in a more fine-grained version as one reads if one would like.

\(^{20}\) See McGrath (2008). Many also attribute a commitment to Conciliationism and a commitment that Conciliationism entails a rational requirement on agents to become skeptical about the correct belief is regarding controversial moral propositions to Henry Sidgwick (see Sidgwick (1981 [1907], pp. 341-343)).

\(^{21}\) Thus even if my argument succeeds, in the end a significantly revisionary view of what moral beliefs we are justified in holding might still be rationally required. I will not be offering my view about whether such a revisionary view would in fact be rationally required, however.

\(^{22}\) Why have I included in this premise the hedging phrase “nearly, or nearly evenly, split?” The reason is that, from what I can tell, Conciliationists do not maintain that an agent has to be in a position where the thing she should (epistemically speaking) believe is that her peers are \textit{exactly} equally divided over a proposition in order for Conciliationism to mandate skepticism about that proposition. Rather, the idea is that the more evenly divided one should believe one’s peers to be, the more skepticism Conciliationism mandates (though, as mentioned earlier, Conciliationists haven’t done much yet to precisify how much skepticism Conciliationism should mandate for different ratios of disagreement). A conception of belief that maintains that beliefs can possess in different degrees of credence is better suited for capturing that aspect of Conciliationism’s view about the implications of different ratios of peer disagreement. But to stick with the all-or-nothing model, and to be charitable, I will simply maintain that
With those three propositions established, they can be used as premises to complete the following line of reasoning:

(C4) If (C1), (C2), and (C3), then we ought to become skeptical about all of our first-order moral beliefs, even granting that robust realism’s metaphysical theses are true.

(C5) Therefore, we ought to become moral skeptics about all of our first-order moral beliefs, even granting that robust realism’s metaphysical theses are true (From (C3) and (C4)).

(C1)-(C5) constitutes the Argument from Conciliationism. Since (C5) entails that the Non-Skepticism thesis I have characterized robust realism as being committed to is false, it entails that robust realism, as I have characterized the view, is false.

To facilitate presenting my responses to the Argument from Conciliationism, I shall first spend a bit more time unpacking the following things: the concept of a “peer,” why it must be the case that one ought to be personally aware of the fact that others are in disagreement with oneself for that fact to have any bearing on the epistemic status of one’s own beliefs, and why the success of the Argument from Conciliationism depends on it being the case that we all ought to believe that opinions are evenly, or nearly evenly, split in cases of fundamental moral disagreement

1.1.2. Peerhood

According to the view of peerhood I believe is correct, and the one which I will take the Argument from Conciliationism to be employing, epistemic agents are peers in terms of ability to correctly assess propositions of some domain when they are equally reliable at correctly assessing such propositions, where being equal reliable just is being equal likely to correctly assess the truth whenever the parties to a peer disagreement are getting to a point where they are close to being evenly split, Conciliationism mandates skepticism about the disputed proposition.
value of such propositions (i.e. coming to a true belief about the truth value of such propositions). Thus, for example, according to this view of peerhood, two meteorologists are peers at forecasting tomorrow’s weather if they are equally likely to form true beliefs about tomorrow’s weather conditions. We can call this view of peerhood the **reliability view of peerhood**.

Though many philosophers working in the epistemology of disagreement, including many prominent proponents of Conciliationist views, also endorse the reliability view of peerhood, this view is not without some controversy. For some philosophers maintain (or at least appear to maintain) that rather than domain-specific reliability at assessing propositions, a combination of equal possession of evidence and general epistemic virtues—e.g. intelligence, thoughtfulness, freedom from bias, etc.—is what is ultimately determinative of peerhood. We can call such a view the **general epistemic virtues** view of peerhood. Since what conception of peerhood gets employed in the Argument from Conciliationism plays a role in determining its overall plausibility, it is worth taking a moment to see why we should reject the general epistemic virtues view of peerhood.

The problem for the general epistemic virtues view of peerhood is that insofar as we want to reserve the term “peer” for referring to sets of people whose disagreement with one another could potentially provide each of them evidence that would undercut the epistemic credentials of their beliefs, as we do here, we must reserve it for referring to people who are equally likely to be true believers about the truth value of such propositions.

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23 See Elga (2007), Kelly (2010) Enoch (2010), Christensen (2011), Vavova (2014), Worsnip (2014). Lackey (2010, p. 302) believes that equal reliability is in part what is constitutive of peerhood, but she also maintains that the equal reliability of two or more people must be a product of those people being evidential and “cognitive” equals in the sense of being equally good at assessing a shared set of evidence.

24 Kelly originally operated with the epistemic virtues view when discussing peer disagreement in his (2005), although, as one might have guessed from footnote 20, he appears to have switched to the reliability view of peerhood in his (2010).

25 Rowland (2016, p. 2) calls the view the “epistemic virtues” view without the qualifier “general,” but I think this qualifier is important for capturing the sense in which the view differs from the reliability view of peerhood.
correct about whatever matter might potentially be under dispute. And it is implausible that for every instance of disagreement, if each of the disagreeing parties has equal possession of evidence and general epistemic virtues, then each of the parties is equally likely correct in their assessment of the truth value of the proposition under dispute. For equal possession of these things does not guarantee equal likelihood at correctly assessing any proposition regardless of the type of proposition it is; this is to say that equal possession of these things does not guarantee domain-specific reliability. We can see that each of these claims are true by considering the following case:

**Meteorologist:** On the basis of the data she has collected, Misty, a meteorologist, comes to believe that the weather tomorrow will be 75°F and sunny. Suppose that Misty’s non-meteorologist friend happens to be paying a visit to her place of work on the day she made this forecast. Misty shows her friend the data she used as evidence to make her forecast. As it turns out, her friend happens to think that data suggests that tomorrow’s weather will be 60°F and overcast. When the two of them disagree, Misty usually either defers to her friend, or at least suspends judgment. She does so for good reason: her friend exhibits the general epistemic virtues to a greater degree than her, and she knows this (as a result of, say, her knowledge the outcomes of their various disagreements in the past, and of the intellectual ability her friend exhibited in acquiring several advanced university degrees). On this disagreement over tomorrow’s weather, however, Misty does not budge. For she knows that her friend has not undergone the sort of training that would make one reliable at making accurate weather forecasts. And she knows that people without such training are usually much less likely to make correct weather forecasts than people who have undergone such training.

I take it that it’s uncontroversial that Misty’s refusal to suspend judgment is epistemically rational. Notice, however, that it is built into the case that Misty’s friend has the same set of evidence to make her judgment as Misty did, and that Misty’s friend is more generally epistemically virtuous than Misty is. Thus what Meteorologist makes apparent is that there are cases where knowledge of the fact that oneself and one’s disagreeing interlocutor are in equal possession of evidence and general epistemic virtues provides no evidence that might undercut the epistemic credentials one’s own belief. Such cases are those where the proposition under dispute requires particular skills to assess which cannot be acquired merely through possessing the relevant
evidence and being generally epistemically virtuous—we might call such skills “domain-specific virtues.” Thus if we want to reserve the term “peer” for referring to sets of people whose disagreement with one another could potentially provide such evidence, we should not use it to refer to sets of people just because they are in equal possession of evidence and general epistemic virtues peer; this is to say we should reject the epistemic virtues view of peerhood.

So considering *Meteorologist* leaves us with the reliability view of peerhood, and it does seem plausible that that view is what explains why Misty’s holding onto her belief is not epistemically irrational. For, given that she believes her friend is more likely to be wrong than she is, it would be epistemically irrational of her to treat her friend’s disagreement as evidence that would undercut the epistemic credentials of her own belief. To do so would be analogous to believing that two scales are unequally accurate at measuring the weight of objects, seeing that the less accurate scale measures the weight of an object differently than the more accurate scale, and losing confidence in the measurement provided by the more accurate scale *because of* the measurement provided by the less accurate scale (a reaction, I take it, that is epistemically irrational). Thus we have good reason to accept the reliability view of peerhood.

Of course, the reliability view of peerhood does not maintain that the fact that a set of people are equals in terms of possession of relevant evidence and general epistemic virtues has absolutely no bearing on whether those people are peers. Plausibly, sometimes having an epistemically justified belief that the disagreeing parties are equals in terms of the evidence they possess and their general epistemic virtues will be enough to provide the disagreeing parties reason to believe each other to be equally reliable at assessing the sort of propositions under dispute. An example of such cases might be those in which there are no domain-specific virtues that are needed to assess the proposition under dispute because no specialized training is required to assess that
proposition. But, as we’ve seen from *Meteorologist*, in cases where specialized training is required to assess the proposition under dispute, the fact that the disagreeing parties are equals in these respects *alone* is not enough to establish that they are peers because it does not establish their equal reliability at assessing the proposition under dispute: it must also be true that the disagreeing parties are equals in terms of domain-specific virtues needed for assessing the proposition under dispute.26

1.1.3. Personal Awareness of Disagreement

Premises (C3) and (C4) include the claim that we ought to be aware that fundamental moral disagreement obtains concerning every moral proposition, and that opinions among the parties to

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26 One might worry that the reliability view of peerhood I have defended seems to not characterize peerhood well for domains like morality. For it seems to not characterize peerhood well in domains where there is apparently no question-begging way of assessing *a posteriori* a person’s track record at getting their judgments right about the facts of that domain, and one such domain seems to be the domain of morality (the domains of aesthetics, logic, mathematics, modality, and non-moral normativity generally perhaps are other such domains).

I am not sure, however, what sort of objection the worry is supposed to amount to. If the objection is supposed to be that it is a problematic feature of the reliability view of peerhood that it requires a person to make assumptions about what the moral facts are in order to assess another person’s moral reliability, then the objection can be dismissed. For it is true of *any domain*—whether it be weather forecasting, or any perceptual judgment—that a person can only make reliability assessments regarding it if they can take it for granted that they know some of the facts of that domain (I take it that it is not advisable to reject the applicability of the reliability view of peerhood for domains like the domain of perceptually discoverable facts).

Let us assume for a moment, however, that the reliability view of peerhood turns out not to be applicable to the moral domain. We have two options about what to do in that case. First, we can maintain that there are no such things as moral peers, since the only plausible conception of peerhood does not apply. Or, second, we can deny that the reliability view of peerhood is one that captures what peerhood is in *any domain*, and formulate a conception of peerhood specifically for the moral domain (or one that applies to the moral domain and a few others whose purported facts take on similar characteristics).

Consider the first option first. If it turns out that there is no such thing as moral peerhood, then the Argument from Conciliationism would never be able to undercut the epistemic credentials of the moral beliefs of anyone. For no one would have any moral peers they could enter into a moral disagreement with, much less a fundamental moral disagreement. I take it that that implication gives proponents of the Argument from Conciliationism good reason to come to the defense of the applicability of the reliability view of peerhood to the moral domain if there is no other plausible conception of peerhood for that domain.

However, might there be another plausible conception of peerhood for the moral domain? I think it is doubtful that there is another plausible conception, insofar as one thinks that a plausible conception has to allow one to assess whether people are moral peers without invoking substantive assumptions about what the moral facts are. If, for instance, someone claimed that the epistemic virtues view of peerhood was the right way to think of moral peerhood, what could she do in defense of that claim? The natural thing would be to show that people who possess the general epistemic virtues to a certain extent and knowledge of some relevant evidence make correct moral judgments more often than not. But it seems one has to take some of the moral facts for granted in order to make the assessment that such people do often get their moral judgments correct. So not even the general epistemic virtues view can escape having to take some moral facts for granted in order to make a peerhood assessment.
these disagreements are evenly, or about evenly, split. To see why this claim is crucial to the Argument from Conciliationism, we need to understand two things: First, we need to understand why it must be the case that an agent ought to be aware of the fact that people are in disagreement with her in order for that fact to have any bearing on the epistemic status of her beliefs at all. Second, we need to understand why it must be the case that an agent ought to be aware that opinions are evenly, or nearly evenly, split among the parties to a peer disagreement in which she is involved in order for that disagreement to pose a skeptical threat to her disputed belief.

To see why it must be the case that one is in a position such that one ought to be personally aware of the fact that someone is in disagreement with oneself for that fact to have any bearing on the epistemic status of one’s own beliefs, then, it will help to first consider the following case. Suppose that person \( A \) believes that \( p \), while person \( B \), who is \( A \)’s peer and lives on the other side of the world relative to \( A \), believes that \( \neg p \). Suppose further that these two people do not know, and are not in a position such that they ought to know, that there exists a person on the other side of the world who is in disagreement with them about whether \( p \). Does the fact that these two people disagree about whether \( p \) have any potential to undermine the epistemic status of their belief about whether \( p \)? No. The reason is that the way facts about disagreement are supposed to undermine the epistemic status of one’s belief is that it provides one evidence that one might have arrived at a false belief. And a fact (or purported fact) cannot provide one evidence if it is not the case that one ought to believe it obtains: there is a difference between there being evidence, and one having that evidence. The lesson to be learned from cases like that just considered, then, is that the mere fact that another person, who is a peer, is in disagreement with oneself is not enough to undermine the epistemic justification of one’s belief that is under dispute. Instead, it must be the case that one
ought to believe that peer disagreement obtains in order for facts about peer disagreement to have any chance of undercutting the epistemic credentials of their beliefs.

1.1.4. Even, Or Nearly Even, Split of Opinions

To see why the success of Argument from Conciliationism requires that one ought to be aware of opinions being evenly, or nearly evenly, split among peers in each case of fundamental moral disagreement, it will also help to start by considering a hypothetical case. Suppose that two paleontologists discover a new dinosaur bone, and that they are the only two people who know that the bone exists. Suppose that one paleontologist believes the bone is a bone of Dinosaur A, while the other believes otherwise, and that these paleontologists have good reason to judge each other to be equally reliable at identifying which sorts of bones are of which dinosaurs. Conciliationism would mandate that these paleontologists suspend judgment about what the bone is of. But suppose that a thousand other paleontologists who are as equally reliable at assessing dinosaur bones come to learn of the existence of the bone, and the majority of these paleontologists come to the conclusion that the bone is a bone of Dinosaur A. Since Conciliationism requires one to equally weight the beliefs of each peer, and the majority of peers of the two paleontologists who originally discovered the bone believe that the bone is a bone of Dinosaur A, Conciliationism does not require that the one of the pair who believed likewise give up her belief, though it will require of the one whose pre-disagreement belief was that the bone was not a bone of Dinosaur A that she at least give up her pre-disagreement belief. The takeaway from this case is that, because Conciliationism requires treating the belief of each party to a peer disagreement as having equal weight, an agent’s justified belief about the ratio of how opinions are divided among peers who disagree over a particular proposition affects what they have to do to comply with Conciliationism. Thus in cases of peer disagreement where the clear majority of the parties to the disagreement
favor one view over the other, it is not the case that Conciliationism requires that all parties suspend judgment about the proposition under dispute. Hence the need to establish that in cases of fundamental moral disagreement opinions are evenly, or about evenly, split among peers, if one wants to employ Conciliationism to derive moral skepticism from such cases.

2. Against the Argument from Conciliationism

There are five propositions robust realists might try to establish to resist the Argument from Conciliationism:

(i) (C3) is False: It is not the case that we all ought to believe that there is disagreement over every moral proposition.

(ii) (C3) is False: While there is disagreement over every moral proposition, it is not the case that there is fundamental moral disagreement over every moral proposition.

(iii) (C3) is False: Even if fundamental moral disagreement obtains over every moral proposition, it is not the case that we ought to believe that opinions are evenly, or about evenly, split in each of these disagreements.

(iv) (C1) is False: Even if Conciliationism is true, it is not the case that we ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreement always amounts to peer disagreement because it is not the case that people in fundamental moral disagreement with one another always ought to view each other as equally reliable at assessing the sort of moral proposition under dispute.

(v) (C2) is False: Conciliationism is false.

While I believe that there are ways to argue for (i) and (ii) (especially (ii)) that are not totally implausible, I shall not discuss them in the main body of the text in what proceeds and will simply grant that (i) and (ii) cannot be established arguendo (I will, however, include a lengthy discussion of them in a footnote for curious readers).27 That is, I shall grant that there are

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27 If strategy (i) can be made successful, then (C3), the premise which claims that we all ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreement obtains over every moral proposition, and that opinions amongst the parties to these disagreements are evenly, or nearly evenly, split, would be undermined. The reason is that if it is not the case that we ought to believe that disagreement obtains over every moral proposition, then it certainly is not the case that we ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreement obtains over every moral proposition.
disagreements over every moral proposition in which none of the parties to the disagreement are less informed about the non-moral facts than the others, none of the parties have formed their disputed moral belief in a procedurally irrational way, and none of the parties reached their disputed belief as a result of undue bias. I shall instead concentrate on showing the claims made in (iii), (iv), and (v) to be true, taking up a defense of each claim in turn starting with (iii).

2.1. Denying That We Ought to Believe That Opinions Are Evenly, Or Nearly Evenly, Split Between the Parties in the Fundamental Moral Disagreement Over Each Moral Proposition

Even granting that it cannot be shown that (i) and (ii) are true, it is implausible that we ought to believe that among the parties to the disagreement over each moral proposition opinions

Insofar as we should take defenders of moral error theory to sincerely believe that some sort of error theory is true, however, strategy (i) certainly fails. For sincere error theorists will maintain that even all paradigmatic examples of obviously true moral propositions are either false, or neither true nor false. For example, sincere error theorists would sincerely affirm that it is not morally wrong (nor is it morally right) to torture babies just for sport, nor is it morally wrong (or morally right) to commit genocide against a group of people because of the color of those people’s skin, nor is it true that one is morally praiseworthy (or blameworthy) for saving a drowning child from a shallow pond. And since, plausibly, the paradigmatic examples of obviously true moral claims are the ones that have the best chance of garnering universal consensus, if we should count on there being disagreement over such claims insofar as we should take moral error theorists to sincerely endorse their error theory, we can count on there being moral disagreement about every moral proposition.

I am personally unaware of any reason to doubt that defenders of moral error theory like J. L. Mackie, Richard Joyce, and Jonas Olson actually sincerely defend their metaethical stance, and so I am inclined to believe that (i) fails. One might object that I have illicitly assumed that metaethical disagreements always imply normative ethical disagreements. We should be take care, the thought goes, to make sure we distinguish between such disagreements because the former do not always entail the latter. Sure enough not all metaethical disagreements imply disagreements in normative ethical disagreements. But it would be implausible to claim that an error theorist’s metaethical commitments is not a case of when one’s metaethical views lead one to be in normative ethical disagreement with others. For the normative ethical commitments enumerated two paragraphs ago do in fact flow directly out of a commitment to moral error theory by definition. Not even those who have been labeled “quietist” moral realists for their rejection of any significant distinction between normative ethics and metaethics (see Dworkin (1996; 2011) and Kramer (2009)) should reject that those commitments flow out of error theory’s metaethical commitments.

Like strategy (i), the success of strategy (ii) would undermine (C3). To make strategy (ii) work, one would need to show that error theorists (or merely those with radically revisionary moral beliefs who reject what I have said are the paradigmatic examples of obviously true moral claims) arrived at their moral beliefs either as a result of ignorance of relevant non-moral facts, procedural irrationality, or bias. It seems unlikely, however, that that can be done. For there does not seem to be any good reasons to believe that Mackie, Joyce, or Olson have defended their metaethical views in a procedurally irrational way, or are holding them only as a result of some sort of bias. Nor does it seem to be plausible to think that these error theorists are any more uninformed about non-moral facts then their philosophical rivals. Indeed, error theorists like Joyce, who has done extensive research on the evolution of humans in defense of his evolutionary debunking argument (see Joyce (2006)) probably is more well-informed about non-moral matters than many other philosophers.
are evenly, or nearly evenly, split. Thus we have good reason to think that (iii) is true. And if (iii) is true, it turns out that (C3) of the Argument from Conciliationism, the premise which claims that we ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreement over every moral proposition, and that opinions are evenly, or nearly evenly, split amongst the parties to these disagreements, is false, making the argument unsound.

Of course, showing that (iii) is true with the greatest amount of possible certainty would require carrying out a grand scale empirical project that would likely involve having people respond to comprehensive surveys with questions about people’s beliefs regarding all sorts of moral propositions. But surely even without having the results of such a project on hand it is safe to assume that for many moral propositions, even if it turns out there is fundamental moral disagreement about them, the vast majority of the parties to these disagreements would be on one side. For surely it is safe to assume that an overwhelming majority of people in these disagreements would be on the side that agrees that it is (at least prima facie) morally impermissible to torture, rape, murder, or rob human beings merely for entertainment; that it is morally impermissible to deliberately cause human beings to suffer by any means merely for entertainment; that we are thus (at least prima facie) morally obligated to protect people from being tortured, raped, murdered, robbed, or made to suffer by any other method or means merely for entertainment; that we are morally obligated to protect innocent people from suffering and harm if there is not a great personal cost to us doing so; that parents are morally obligated to care for their children in a way that facilitates their children’s development into people who can live flourishing lives; that people ought to care for and respect each other generally regardless of whether they are linked by familial ties; that societies are morally obligated to ensure that the youth in their population receive a good education; and that the basic institutions of a society should not be set up to systematically
perpetuate injustices. Consequently, we can safely assume that (C3) is false because it is not the case that there is fundamental moral disagreement concerning every moral proposition. Thus it turns out that even if it is true that fundamental moral disagreements do amount to peer disagreements, and that Conciliationism is true, the Argument from Conciliationism fails.

Proponents of the Argument from Conciliationism might object that we could assume that the vast majority of the parties to the fundamental moral disagreements over those propositions would be on the side that believes them to be true only if we make the set of people whose moral views contribute to the fundamental moral disagreements unduly large. We should, the thought goes, make sure to leave out the views of those who have not taken the time to carefully consider the moral propositions under dispute carefully. For these are the views of those who are most likely to be not fully informed about relevant non-moral facts and to not have ensured that their moral views are rationally coherent. Once we make sure to not include these views in characterizing the various fundamental moral disagreements, then, we can see either that opinions are actually split, or nearly split, about those moral propositions I mentioned above than I have assumed we do not have good reason to think opinions would be so split in idealized scenarios.

One worry for this objection is that it may very well be only in a highly idealized scenario which is unachievable in practice that we can say with any certainty that we have managed to exclude all moral views not formed after careful consideration in characterizing the fundamental moral disagreements that exist. Thus proponents of the Argument from Conciliationism could never show that it actually succeeds in undercutting the moral beliefs of us actually extant agents. We can, however, bracket this worry. For it turns out that there are survey results available at the

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28 While beliefs about what respect, or good education, or injustice substantively amount to may vary widely in certain respects, we can presume that some central content here will be overlapping, i.e. agreed to by most.
PhilPapers website of some of the moral views of current professional philosophers and philosophy graduate students working in ethics—a group of people whose moral views plausibly would be included in the characterization of the various fundamental moral disagreements after all non-carefully-considered moral views were winnowed out—which we can use to gauge whether opinions are actually evenly split in the fundamental moral disagreements that (we are assuming) obtain over those moral propositions I mentioned above, or would be in a more idealized scenario. According to those results, on their view of what the correct normative ethical theory is, opinions are split between deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and “other” in the following ways:

among those who specialize in normative ethics, opinions are split 28.5% / 24.1% / 18.2% / 29.2%;
among those who specialize in applied ethics, opinions are split 19.6% / 24.1% / 24.1% / 32.1%;
and among those who specialize in metaethics, opinions are split 19.3% / 20.3% / 23.5% / 36.9%.30

I take it that it is safe to assume that, despite the different ultimate moral principles they are committed to, those who accept either deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics do not hold a set of radically revisionary particular moral judgments which does not include any of those I claimed it is safe to assume there is mostly agreement about among those involved in the fundamental moral disagreements over them. Since, then, it is likely that only a fraction of those who accept a view that falls into the “other” category accept a radically revisionary set of particular moral judgments that does not include those judgments, and the majority of philosophers surveyed accepted a view that did not fall in the “other” category, the survey data gives us reason to expect that opinions would not be split about the moral propositions I mentioned above in cases of

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29 One might doubt that the moral views of professional, and aspiring professional, moral philosophers, should be afforded this level of respect. I shall not argue that they should be, but it must be assumed that their views should be treated with a good level of respect if we are to use the PhilPapers data. And since I do not know of any other more helpful data source for our purposes here, I shall leave it up to those who want to disallow my use of the PhilPapers data in making my rejoinder to give an argument for why I cannot do so.

30 The PhilPapers survey data can be accessed at https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl.
fundamental moral disagreement about them. Without data that suggests otherwise, then, that is the view that we should adopt. And since adopting that view entails rejecting (C3), we should reject (C3).

2.2. Denying that Fundamental Moral Disagreements Always Amount to Peer Disagreements

Worse yet for the proponent of the Argument from Conciliationism, (iv), which claims that it is not the case that we ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreements always amount to peer disagreements, is true, and so (C1), the premise which claims that we ought to believe that fundamental moral disagreements always amount to peer disagreements, is false. In fact, (iv) is true even if the preferred method of most (if not all) Conciliationists of determining peerhood turns out to be the correct one. That method employs the principle for evaluating the evidential import of disagreements known as Independence, the following formulation of which comes from Katia Vavova:

**Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another’s expressed belief that $p$, in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about $p$, I shouldn’t rely on my initial belief about $p$, nor on the reasoning behind that belief.\(^{31}\)

Independence is intended to make it impermissible to consider a disagreeing interlocutor’s view about $p$ as false, and so as having no evidential bearing on whether one’s own belief that $p$ is epistemically justified, simply because that disagreeing interlocutor’s belief, and the line of reasoning employed by her to reach that belief, contradicts one’s own.\(^{32}\) It is thereby intended to prevent one from not according a disagreeing interlocutor peer status just because of the

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\(^{31}\) Vavova (2014, p. 309). Vavova’s formulation is a slightly different variant of the formulation found in Christensen (2009, p. 758; 2011, p. 1). I prefer Vavova’s formulation because it explicitly makes mention of a prohibition against relying on the very belief under dispute, whereas others formulations do not. I think that formulation is something that proponents of Independence are committed to, so it is worth making it explicit.

\(^{32}\) Christensen (2011, p. 2).
disagreement. So, for example, if two people are in disagreement about who the 29th U.S. president was—one person correctly believes it was Harding, while the other falsely believes it was Coolidge—Independence prohibits them from citing their own belief and their reasons for holding that belief as evidence that their disagreeing interlocutor holds a false belief, and so as evidence that potentially counts against the reliability of one’s disagreeing interlocutor.

There seems to be good reason for Conciliationists to be committed to Independence. For it is plausible that Conciliationism would be entirely unmotivated if Independence were false (Christensen, in fact, believes that acceptance of Independence is what separates Conciliationists from their opponents). After all, if in at least some cases of disagreement with those one ought to believe are one’s peer one were allowed to cite the very fact of disagreement as evidence that one’s peer happens to be the one in the wrong, and so also as evidence that might legitimate demoting them from peerhood, it is not obvious why it would be the case that one always ought to become agnostic in the face peer disagreement. For in such cases one would not be rationally obligated, from an epistemic point of view, to reduce confidence in one’s own contested belief.

The problem for the Argument from Conciliationism is that pretty much everyone has moral beliefs that count as what we can call “Deep Beliefs:”

**Deep Beliefs**: Beliefs which are deeply embedded in an agent’s set of beliefs in the sense that either they undergird many of one’s other beliefs, or are undergirded by many of one’s other beliefs, or both, such that setting them and the background beliefs which support them aside would require setting aside many of one’s other beliefs.

Many of an agent’s deep beliefs will be invulnerable to the skeptical demands of Conciliationism when contested by a disagreeing interlocutor. The reason is that Independence

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pretty much ensures that we would not have the means to accord peer status to those who disagree with those beliefs. For having to set both such beliefs aside and the background reasoning that led one to hold them aside in evaluating a disagreeing interlocutor’s belief (and thereby the evidential weight of their disagreement) would leave one having to either believe it is indeterminate whether you both are equally reliable about the matter under dispute, or to believe that one has too thin of a basis to be epistemically justified in rendering any reliability judgments. For example, consider the following case of extreme non-moral disagreement:

Skeptic: Sam is a radical skeptic about all knowledge claims in general. He tells Ava that none of her beliefs amount to knowledge. Ava believes, like the average person, that it is not true that she does not know anything.

Ava’s belief that she knows at least something is (as it is for every other agent’s belief that they know something) likely the deepest of her Deep Beliefs. Independence requires her to set aside that belief—and so all of her particular judgments about what she knows—and whatever background reasoning that led her to that belief in evaluating the evidential import of Sam’s disagreement. And, it seems that by requiring this Independence has stripped Ava of any basis for according Sam peer status. For Sam’s disagreement with Ava runs so deep that it seems Ava has to set aside her own beliefs about everything in order to perform her evaluation of Sam’s belief in a way that satisfies Independence—after all, Sam explicitly denies that any of Ava’s beliefs amount to knowledge. After setting these beliefs of hers aside, what resources does she have left for deciding whether to accord Sam peer status? The answer seems to be “nothing.” In fact, it seems that the only potentially justifiable evaluations that are open to Ava are either to declare that Sam’s status as her peer is indeterminate, or is something that she should suspend belief about. For in setting aside all of her views that are contested by Sam, she would not have any beliefs left which she could appeal to as a basis for justifiably judging Sam to be either reliable or unreliable.
about the matter under dispute. Thus in case setting aside all of her contested views still allows her to justifiably render a judgment about Sam’s peer status, it seems that the only thing she is in a position to claim is that there is not a clear answer about whether Sam is her peer. And in case Sam’s radical skeptical challenge also ends up encroaching on Ava’s potential peerhood evaluation of Sam itself, then Ava would have to suspend judgment on whether Sam is her peer altogether. Both evaluations, however, do not amount to Ava according Sam peer status. So it turns out that in having to set aside her Deep Belief that she knows anything, if Independence is true, Ava could not be epistemically justified in judging Sam (or anyone else, ultimately) to be her peer in case they judge that proposition to be false. Thus the proposition that Ava knows anything is an example of one about which Conciliationism could not require that Ava suspend her belief about.

Now in order for the Argument from Conciliationism to succeed, it would have to be the case that in a dispute over even their moral Deep Beliefs, robust realists have to view their disagreeing interlocutors as peers. But while the extent of disagreement a robust realist might be in with someone who disagrees with their moral Deep Beliefs is not as extreme as the extent of disagreement between Sam and Ava, we can see that Independence limits a robust realist’s grounds for attributing peerhood to those who disagree them with them about their moral Deep Beliefs in the same way it limits the grounds Ava has for attributing peerhood to Sam.³⁴ For suppose that a radical moral skeptic were to declare that they believe that all of those moral beliefs I claimed in §1.2.1 we could safely assume widespread agreement about among the parties to the fundamental moral disagreements about them are false; such moral beliefs are plausibly among people’s deepest ones.³⁵ Suppose that you disagree (since you do not hold a radically revisionary set of first-order

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³⁴ This actually turns out to be true even if a robust realist held a radically revisionary set of moral judgments, though I will only make my argument using examples of non-revisionary moral judgments.

³⁵ These propositions are that it is (at least prima facie) morally impermissible to torture, rape, murder, or rob human beings merely for entertainment; that it is morally impermissible to cause human beings to suffer by any means merely
moral judgments). After setting aside your belief and the background reasoning that led you to it to satisfy the demands of Independence, what do you have left to evaluate the moral reliability of your disagreeing interlocutor? Pretty much nothing. For, presumably, your belief in those propositions is what undergirds most if not all of your other moral beliefs. Those undergirded beliefs in turn likely provide abductive support, in something like reflective equilibrium fashion, to those undergirding beliefs—i.e. the plausibility of the beliefs supported one’s moral Deep Beliefs is part of what contributes to the apparent plausibility of those Deep Beliefs. So it turns out you would have to set aside all your moral beliefs in order to evaluate the moral reliability of the radical moral skeptic if they confronted you with their disagreement with you about those Deep Beliefs. And in doing so, you would have no basis to judge her to be at least as likely as you to be right about moral matters as you are (i.e. equally reliable), and so no basis to render a determinate judgment about whether she is your moral peer. You are, at best, only epistemically justified in believing that it is indeterminate whether you both are moral peers. For it is not as if one can determine another’s moral reliability independently of their own beliefs about what the moral facts are (one cannot make reliability judgments about any domain without citing what they believe are the facts in that domain). Consequently, it turns out that Independence makes it so that one could not deem a person who is in disagreement with them over their deepest moral Deep Beliefs to be their moral peers. Thus it turns out that Conciliationism could not allow a person’s moral Deep Beliefs.

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36 Not to mention the radical moral skeptic also disagrees with you about those beliefs that are undergirded by your moral Deep Beliefs.
Beliefs to have their epistemic justification undercut by being confronted by disagreement over them.

There are two responses proponents of the Argument from Conciliationism might give. The first is that I have helped myself to an example of moral disagreement that is not of the sort proponents have in mind as the sort that undercuts our moral beliefs. Of course, the thought goes, Independence would not afford someone any basis for attributing peerhood to a radical moral skeptic. But the vast majority of those who we are in moral disagreements with in real life are not radical moral skeptics. These ordinary disagreeing interlocutors for the most part do not disagree with us on all deep moral matters, nor even the majority of moral matters generally. With that in mind, it becomes much more plausible that Independence would not strip us of any basis to evaluate the moral reliability of people who are in deep moral disagreement with us.

Sure enough, most of us are not assailed by radical moral skeptics in our everyday lives. However, the inclusion of reference to radical moral skeptics in the argument I made is not essential to its success, but merely facilitates its presentation. For even if your disagreeing interlocutor was not a radical skeptic, insofar as the contested belief of yours is sufficiently deep, Independence still would strip you of any basis for being epistemically justified in evaluating them as a moral peer. The reason is that having to set aside a belief that is sufficiently deep and the background reasoning that led one to hold it plausibly results in one having no basis left to evaluate the reliability of a disagreeing interlocutor (again, this is true for any sort of belief, including moral beliefs). Thus, if Jim tells you that the one moral disagreement he has with you is over whether it is morally impermissible to torture, rape, murder, rob, or cause people to suffer in any other sort of way merely for entertainment—he says that proposition is false, while you think it is true—it does not matter that Jim has some moral beliefs that he is not skeptical about. For these moral
beliefs are almost certainly going to be deranged from your point of view, and so would not be ones you share; after all, they are the moral beliefs of someone who thinks it is morally permissible to make people to suffer merely for entertainment. So once you set aside your belief in the moral impermissibility of making people suffer merely for entertainment and the reasoning that led you to it, in all likelihood you will have no other resources to evaluate Jim’s moral reliability, and so no resources for according him peer status. Notice too that it would not help proponents of the Argument from Conciliationism to try and concoct different sets of moral beliefs for Jim such that robust realists would be forced to admit something to the effect of, “well, Jim disagrees with me about the moral status of making people suffer merely for entertainment, but other than that he’s reliable enough about moral matters to be my moral peer, so I guess I should give up my belief about the moral impermissibility of making people suffer merely for entertainment given that Jim disagrees with me about it.” For even if robust realists were somehow forced to admit that, still that would not be to admit to radical moral skepticism being true; for the admission would be based on the fact that one and one’s disagreeing interlocutor were confident in other moral beliefs. Ultimately, then, the point is just disagreements cannot run too deep if they are to leave the disagreeing parties any basis to accord the other peer status.

The second response is perhaps more of a change in strategy rather than a direct objection to the argument I have made in this section. The response begins by noting that we can actually distinguish two different ways Conciliationists might maintain that we should react to cases where adhering to Independence leaves someone with no basis for rendering a determinative judgment in favor of according a disagreeing interlocutor peer status. These two ways are:

No Independent Reason Principle (NIRP): Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation fails to give me good reason for confidence that I’m better informed, or more likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly [or more reliable for some other reason], I, [if I am
to remain epistemically rational], must revise my belief in the direction of the other person’s.

**Good Independent Reason Principle (GIRP):** Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation gives me good reason to be confident that the other person is [at least as] equally well-informed, and [at least as] equally likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly [or at least as equally reliable for some other reason], I, [if I am to remain epistemically rational], must revise my belief in the direction of the other person’s.  

The difference between the two principles are slight, but they can potentially lead to very different consequences. According to NIRP, unless one is epistemically justified in believing oneself to be more reliable than one’s disagreeing interlocutor about the matter under dispute, one must conciliate and be driven toward suspending judgment about one’s own and one’s disagreeing interlocutor’s pre-disagreement beliefs. Thus NIRP maintains that if adhering to Independence leads one to be unable to render a determinate judgment about one’s disagreeing interlocutor’s peer status, then Conciliationism goes into effect and undercuts your contested belief. On the other hand, GIRP requires that unless one has good reason to think that one’s disagreeing interlocutor is at least as reliable about the matter under dispute, one need not conciliate to remain epistemically rational. Thus GIRP maintains that if adhering to Independence leads one to be unable to render a determinate judgment about one’s disagreeing interlocutor’s peer status, then Conciliationism does not go into effect.

As one might’ve guessed, my argument’s success depends on GIRP being true. But, the objection goes, we should accept NIRP rather than GIRP, and modify the Argument from Conciliationism to account for that. For it seems implausible that we could justifiably discount the challenge posed by a disagreeing interlocutor without special reason to do so, and the fact that we are not in a position to know whether or not she is a peer does not seem like a special enough

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37 These distinctions, and their particular formulations presented here, were made by Christensen (2011, p. 15). The helpful labels for the distinctions come from Vavova (2014, pp. 316-317).
reason to do so. Rather, the onus should be on someone to show that she is more reliable than her disagreeing interlocutor about the matter under dispute if she is to discount the challenge posed by the disagreement.\textsuperscript{38} Thus it turns out that a suitably modified version of the Argument from Conciliationism can get around my arguments.

While NIRP might initially seem the more attractive alternative, we ultimately should reject it in favor of GIRP because it leads to an untenable form of domain-general radical skepticism about knowledge in general.\textsuperscript{39} To see why, recall the \textit{Skeptic} case above. In that case, Sam the radical skeptic tells Ava that she does not know anything. Ava disagrees. To follow Independence in figuring out how to respond to the disagreement, Ava has to set aside all of her particular judgments about what she knows. Consequently, adhering to Independence would lead Ava to a position where the only potentially justifiable evaluations that are open to her are either to declare that Sam’s status as her peer is indeterminate, or is something that she should suspend belief about. Neither evaluation involves Ava deeming herself to be more reliable than Sam. Thus according to NIRP, Ava would have to suspend belief about whether she knows anything because of her disagreement with Sam, to wit, she should become a radical skeptic in the face of disagreement with Sam. I take it we have good reason to reject epistemological principles that drive us toward wholesale, domain-general skepticism. Thus we should reject NIRP in favor of GIRP. So the second response, which requires NIRP being true, fails. With that, nothing stands in the way of my argument for (iv), and so we have good reason to reject (C1) of the Argument from Conciliationism.

3. Conclusion

\textsuperscript{38} King (2012, pp. 266-269), seems to suggest something like line of reasoning might be open to the skeptic.

\textsuperscript{39} Christensen (2011, p. 16) and Vavova (2015, pp. 315-318) concur.
I have argued that the Argument from Conciliationism fails due to both empirical issues and theoretical issues. The empirical issues stem from us not having good reason to believe that the sort of disagreement that needs to obtain for the argument to go through actually obtains. For even if we grant that fundamental moral disagreement obtains over every moral proposition (due to the reality of people such as metaethical error theorists), we still would not have good reason to believe that views are even close to being evenly split in the fundamental moral disagreements over those propositions. The theoretical issues stem from issues related to the identification of moral peers. The bad news for the proponent of the Argument from Conciliationism is that even if it is granted that the way we ought to go about identifying peers is to do so in a way that is compliant with the Independence principle—the Conciliationist’s preferred principle for assessing the evidential weight of a disagreeing interlocutor’s disagreement—it is still very implausible that an agent could encounter moral peers disagreement with whom would rationally necessitate adopting radical moral skepticism.

As I mentioned briefly at the start of §1, however, none of what I have argued in this chapter suggests that Conciliationism might rationally necessitate that we adopt significantly revisionist views about what moral knowledge we have. Conciliationism might, for example, require that all of us suspend judgment about the paradigm examples of contemporary controversial moral issues regarding, for example, the use of torture, the death penalty, abortion, immigration policy and state borders, the welfare of non-human animals, non-sentient nature, and many others. Further work to determine whether we would need to reject Conciliationism to protect at least some of our moral beliefs about these controversial moral issues is outside the purview of this chapter. What I have aimed to establish here is just that we need not worry that the epistemic credentials of all of our moral beliefs would be undermined by the truth of Conciliationism.
As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, however, even if I have shown that the Argument of Conciliationism fails, there still remains the potential threat of Justin Horn’s Reliability Argument from Disagreement. Our attention shall shift to that argument in the next chapter.
Chapter 3, The Reliability Argument from Disagreement

Introduction

In the last chapter, we considered the difficulties faced by the Argument from Conciliationism, the first of the two epistemological arguments from disagreement that we will be taking a look at in this thesis. In this chapter, our attention shifts to the second of the two arguments: the Reliability Argument from Disagreement.

1. Horn’s Reliability Argument from Disagreement

1.1. Breakdown of the Argument

If even one of the arguments I offered against the Argument from Conciliationism in the previous chapter succeed, then robust realists have good reason to believe that there is no path from the fact of moral disagreements between moral peers to the conclusion that we ought to be radical moral skeptics. Readers might have noticed that a common theme among those arguments I offered is that any individual moral agent is guaranteed to have a set of moral beliefs that is invulnerable to Conciliationism were they to be directly contested by a disagreeing interlocutor. For many agents will have moral beliefs such that even if those beliefs were contested in fundamental moral disagreements, opinions would not even be close to evenly split about whether they were true; and, more importantly, all agents will have moral beliefs such that it is implausible that they could deem someone their moral peer if they were in fundamental moral disagreement with one over those beliefs. To formulate an epistemological argument from disagreement that might succeed where the Argument from Conciliationism fails, then, one needs to figure out how considerations about fundamental moral disagreements might play a role in undercutting a moral
belief for reasons that ultimately have nothing to do with that moral belief being what is directly under dispute in a fundamental moral disagreement itself.

How might someone do that? The trick is to establish two things. First, fundamental moral disagreements are, or would be under idealized conditions, so extensive amongst those who we ought to believe have been the most epistemically responsible in forming their moral beliefs that we ought to believe that our best methods of moral inquiry would be generally unreliable (insofar as moral facts are realistically construed). Second, there is no way to salvage the epistemic credentials of any our moral beliefs once we know about what fundamental moral disagreements suggest about the unreliability of our best methods of moral inquiry.

This two-step strategy was recently employed by Justin Horn’s “Reliability Argument from Disagreement” (hereafter the RAD). Horn’s RAD begins with the premise that we ought to agree that the most epistemically responsible way of engaging in moral inquiry is to use some sort of method for bringing our moral beliefs into what is known as “wide reflective equilibrium” (hereafter it should be assumed that I am speaking of wide reflective equilibrium whenever I speak of the “method of reflective equilibrium”). One’s moral beliefs are in wide reflective equilibrium if they form a coherent set and are the ones one would endorse after engaging in a process of revising an initial set of intuition-based moral judgments in light of knowledge of all of the

40 The RAD is developed in Horn (2017, §4-§5).
41 Traditionally, rather than talk of moral intuitions, the method of reflective equilibrium has been characterized as beginning with a set of one’s “considered moral judgments,” a term popularized by John Rawls (1999, p. 42). Horn, however, uses talk of intuitions instead. Why does he do so? No specific reason is given by him, though I suspect that his reason for doing so is to increase the scope of the views affected by his argument to include those contemporary views of reflective equilibrium that eschew the narrower concept (in the sense of having lesser extension) of “considered moral judgments” for the broader concept of intuitions. (Rawls characterized considered moral judgments as those moral judgments that are formed under conditions that are conducive to making good judgments of any kind, moral or otherwise. Thus they are not formed hastily, or as a result of heightened emotional states like anger or fear, or out of self-interest, and they are not those that are held unconfidently. While there are some overlaps in the characterization of considered moral judgments and moral intuitions as they are commonly conceived today, as we will see later in the characterization of intuitions in §1.1.1, but there are some differences. For example, it seems like
relevant non-moral facts, and after considering all potential competing moral views. The argument then notes that if different agents begin the process of achieving reflective equilibrium from moral intuitions that are sufficiently divergent, insofar as these divergences are not the result of differences between knowledge of non-moral facts, procedural rationality, or bias, they will reach significantly divergent reflective equilibria from one another. The reason is that such differences in moral intuitions are not the result of the sources of errors the method of reflective equilibrium is supposed to correct for; thus we should not expect them to be weeded out even by flawless employment of the method by different agents.

The RAD then launches into the following line of reasoning for showing how our epistemic justification for thinking that the method of reflective equilibrium is reliable is connected to what we should believe about fundamental moral disagreements: If we actually do observe widespread (in a sense to be explained at the start of §2.2.1) fundamental moral disagreement of the sort that gives us reason to believe that many of us have significantly divergent moral intuitions, then we have good reason to believe that many of us will be morally unreliable even if we flawlessly brought our moral beliefs into reflective equilibrium. For fundamental moral disagreements just are those disagreements that bottom out in divergent moral intuitions (rather than a non-moral source of disagreement). And sufficiently divergent sets of moral intuitions will lead to significantly divergent reflective equilibria. Since robust realists are committed to maintaining that in cases of moral disagreements (over a proposition whose truth-value is not indeterminate) at least one party must be holding a false moral belief, they must be committed to maintaining that when

\[^{42}\text{Horn (2017, p. 373).}\]
different agents reach significantly divergent reflective equilibria, at least one party’s set of moral beliefs must be significantly in error. Robust realists, then, must be committed to maintaining that if many different agents reach widely divergent reflective equilibria, then moral error is widespread. Thus they must be committed to the claim that if we were to acquire good evidence that many different agents reach sufficiently divergent reflective equilibria, then we would acquire good reasons to believe that the method of reflective equilibrium is a method of moral inquiry that is generally unreliable. For if the antecedent to that conditional is fulfilled, we would have good evidence that significant moral error is pervasive even among people who have flawlessly employed the method of reflective equilibrium; such evidence suggests that that method is an unreliable way to access the (realistically construed) moral truths.

The punchline for the RAD, then, is captured in this line of reasoning: Evidence of the general unreliability of a method provides a defeater for the epistemic credentials of any belief formed through the employment of that method. One thus needs to acquire special reason to believe that the beliefs formed via a generally unreliable method are not epistemically suspect in one’s own case if one is to justifiably hold onto those beliefs—a “defeater-defeater,” as it is sometimes put. The problem for the robust realist is that once the general unreliability of our best method of moral inquiry is established, there is nowhere to turn to for acquiring a defeater-defeater to salvage the epistemic credentials of one’s own moral beliefs. Thus if we acquire evidence of sufficiently widespread fundamental moral disagreement, then the only epistemically rational choice for us is to adopt radical moral skepticism.

The preceding line of reasoning spelled out in the previous two paragraphs leads Horn to formulate the RAD schematically in the following way:
(RAD1) If there is widespread fundamental moral disagreement, then many people would have a significant number of false moral beliefs even if they were to flawlessly employ our best method of moral inquiry [i.e. the method of moral reflective equilibrium].

(RAD2) If many people would have a significant number of false moral beliefs even if they were to flawlessly apply our best method of moral inquiry, then that method is not reliable for many people.

(RAD3) If one is aware that our best method of moral inquiry is not reliable for many people, then one cannot be justified in believing the outputs of such a method unless one has special reason to believe that it is reliable in one’s own case.

(RAD4) It is not the case that any of us has special reason to believe that the best method of moral inquiry is reliable in our own case [or anyone else’s].

(RAD5) Therefore, if we become aware of widespread fundamental moral disagreement, then we cannot be justified in believing the outputs of our best method of moral inquiry.43

As the fact that the argument stops at the conditional in (RAD5) suggests, Horn believes that it remains an open question whether the sort of widespread fundamental moral disagreement that would set the argument in motion obtains in the actual world (though he suspects it already does regarding controversial issues such as those concerning the status of fetuses, non-human animals, and non-sentient nature44). Nonetheless, he believes that if the antecedent of (RAD5) is true, the consequent follows. So, in his view, the argument remains a live skeptical threat to realist metaethical views, as it makes them hostages to empirical fortune in one particular way: should subsequent empirical research on moral disagreement (in conjunction with philosophical theorizing about the method of reflective equilibrium) uncover that fundamental moral disagreement is actually common between the people we have most reason to believe have brought their moral beliefs into reflective equilibrium, then we will be saddled with radical moral skepticism.

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43 This argument, besides what it is added in brackets, is quoted verbatim from Horn (2017, p. 374).
44 Horn (2017, pp. 374-375).
1.1.1. Explanatory Interlude: Intuitions and Reflective Equilibrium

Before jumping into my arguments against the RAD, it will be helpful to take a moment to say a bit about what conception of intuition is in play here and what roles intuitions play in methods of reflective equilibrium.

There is in fact a sizable literature on the metaphysics, epistemic significance, and phenomenology of intuitions both as they are used in philosophy generally and in moral philosophy in particular, and that body of literature is steadily growing.\(^\text{45}\) As with any area of philosophy where much work has been done, there is a fair amount of disagreement on a number of issues regarding the nature of intuitions. But what is not controversial is that intuitions are a type of occurrent mental state that fall under the class of \textit{seeming} states: when one has an intuition that \(p\), one undergoes the conscious experience of it seeming to one that \(p\). In particular, intuitions are the seeming states whose contents are putative abstracta (i.e. things that are neither spatiotemporally nor causally potent) that are not epistemically accessible via perception. The contents of intuitions thus distinguish them from their empirical analogues: \textit{perceptions}, the class of seeming states whose contents are objects of the physical world that are epistemically accessible via sense perception. The contents of seemings had through intuition are sometimes called “intellectual” seemings to distinguish them from the seemings had through perception which are called “perceptual” or sensory seemings. (There is also the class of \textit{memorial seemings}, or memories, whose contents can be both the contents of intuitions and perceptions formerly experienced).

\(^\text{45}\) For a helpful overview of the literature on intuitions, see Koksvik (2017).
All seeming states have several features in common. One is that all seeming states are occurrent. Another is that one need not make a conscious effort to form them. Rather, one has an experience of a seeming state spontaneously and non-inferentially (which is not to say that one cannot exert conscious effort for the purpose getting oneself to spontaneously experience a seeming state: indeed, the point of things like thought experiments and “intuition pumps” is to induce people to experience a seeming state\textsuperscript{46}). Seeming states all also have representational content in that their content represents something as being the case, and thus are truth-evaluable. Furthermore, seeming states, are said to have a \textit{presentational phenomenology}: when it seems to one that $p$, one non-voluntarily has an impression that $p$ is true, and this impression tends to dispose one to believe that $p$ in the absence of independent reasons to believe that not-$p$.

To bring out the contrast between a mental state that is merely representational as opposed to both representational and presentational, consider the difference between a belief and a perception. We can see that a belief is merely representational from the fact that one can believe that $p$ even if it does not seem all perceptually seem to her that $p$; in contrast, one cannot perceive that $p$ without it being the case that it seems to one that $p$ (although one can withhold believing that $p$ despite having a perception of it). As an illustration, consider someone who, despite it not seeming—either perceptually or intuitively—to her to be the case that God exists, nonetheless believes that God exists. The only conscious mental state she is experiencing is the merely representational one of \textit{belief} that God; she lacks a seeming state altogether which non-voluntarily compels her to believe that God exists (in the absence of reasons to believe otherwise). Now consider what happens when she suddenly has the experience of it being intuitive to her that God exists because (say) she learns of a version of the cosmological argument, and that argument

\footnote{See Koksvik (2013).}
intuitively seems sound to her. In the moment she experiences that intuition, she experiences a seeming state that presents it to be the case that God exists. That state non-voluntarily disposes her to believe that God exists in the absence of reasons to doubt that God exists, and she’ll continue to be so disposed as long as she experiences the intuitive seeming. ⁴⁷

Intuitions can be both about particular facts, or can be about facts with a more general scope such as general principles for determining other facts. Thus, for example, logical intuitions can be about something as particular as whether a particular deductive inference is valid, or can be about as something as general as a rule for what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for being a valid argument. In the case of moral intuitions, an agent’s intuitions might be about the moral status of a particular case of donating to a charity, or about a general principle that purports to guide one’s assessment of the moral status of particular acts, character traits, etc. such as that other things being equal, it is better to act benevolently to others, or, more abstractly, fundamental theories such as that the morally right thing to do in all circumstances is the act that would maximize utility. One’s intuitions can even be about principles of reasoning. Thus, for example, one might have intuitions about how to revise one’s moral beliefs when one finds inconsistencies among them.

Additionally, intuitions are epistemologically significant mental states. For in an analogous way to how the presentational phenomenology of perceptions makes them the rational place to begin reasoning about empirical matters, the presentational phenomenology of intuitions makes them the rational place to begin reasoning about the truths in abstract domains, like the domain of

⁴⁷ For a much more detailed account of presentational phenomenology and the presentational phenomenology of intuition in particular, see Bengson (2015b, pp. 715-734).
morality.\footnote{48} For, just as there is no rational place for an agent to begin her reasoning about empirical matters from than from beliefs based on what seems true about the physical world seems to her via sense perception prior to conducting more sophisticated empirical research, there is no plausible place for an agent to begin reasoning about abstract matters from than from her beliefs based on what seems intuitively true about abstract matters to her prior to spending more time carefully considering and studying the relevant matters. Indeed, other potential alternative starting points for those two types of reasoning are either totally implausible (e.g. beliefs based on wishful thinking), or actually need to be argued for as a permissible step in one’s reasoning, and so are not really starting points (e.g. one would need to argue for a belief that maintains that things are not as they seem, as in the belief that we are all actually brains in vats, in a way that one would not need to argue for a belief that maintains that things are as they seem\footnote{49}).

For the reasons given in the preceding paragraph, the method of reflective equilibrium, as a method of moral inquiry, takes as its starting points intuitions about general moral principles and particular cases. Carrying out the method involves subjecting an initial set of intuition-based moral beliefs to various procedures such that one arrives at moral beliefs from them that form an internally coherent and are supportive of one another, coherent with and explanatorily supported by one’s \textit{non-moral} beliefs,\footnote{50} and free of the influence of problematic biases. At the initial stage,

\footnote{48} Foundationalist epistemological theories will offer different accounts of why these two types of seemings are rational starting points than coherentist epistemological theories.
\footnote{49} If one is not convinced that this asymmetry exists, think about what is entailed by one not even being \textit{prima facie} justified in starting one’s reasoning from beliefs based on one’s seemings prior to acquiring good reason to trust in the reliability of one’s seemings. One will quickly see that that proposition entails that one is pushed to an untenable form of domain-general radical skepticism since it entails that one has no way of acquiring a justified starting point in one’s reasoning.
\footnote{50} The notion of “support” or “explanation” that goes above mere logical consistency that is at work in the views of reflective equilibrium theorists has yet to be given a thorough elaboration (see Daniels (2016, §4.3)). I will not attempt to provide that needed elaboration here. My own hunch, however, is that these notions of “support” and “explanation” require that one not form beliefs that are objectionably ad hoc to increase overall coherence, nor form beliefs that are totally disconnected from one’s other beliefs even if such beliefs are logically consistent with one’s other beliefs.
one checks for how well one’s intuition-based beliefs about what the correct general moral principles and judgments about particular are cohere with one another: The assumption is that at the initial stage it is pretty much inevitable that some incoherence will obtain in each agent’s set of moral beliefs in the sense that the moral principles one initially endorses do not successfully account for the correctness of each of the particular moral judgments one initially endorses, and that there will be inconsistencies between the moral principles and particular moral judgments one endorses. The initial stage is thus followed up by a series of stages aiming to remove the incoherence from one’s moral beliefs. At these stages, an agent can revise either her beliefs about general moral principles or her particular moral judgments; the method does not allow any belief to escape the possibility of revision regardless of the generality of its propositional contents. Throughout the process of revising her moral beliefs in the pursuit of reflective equilibrium, an agent might end up discarding many of her intuition-based moral beliefs in favor of other ones that are less intuitive, but more plausible in light of the other moral beliefs she wishes to retain.

The ideal endpoint for the method of reflective equilibrium (at least when used as a method of moral inquiry specifically) is the achievement of “wide reflective equilibrium.” When an agent has reached wide reflective equilibrium, her moral beliefs will take on several features. First her moral beliefs will form a coherent set. Second, her moral beliefs will have been formed after thorough considerations of all of the plausible alternatives. Third, her moral beliefs will be consistent with, and formed in light of, all relevant non-moral information. Fourth, her moral beliefs will not be ones that she endorses because of the influence of some problematic bias (this fourth condition is in part a result of the third condition, as one of the non-moral beliefs every agent presumably has enjoins them to ensure that their beliefs are not held because of problematic biases).
The probative value of the method of reflective equilibrium for those who are realists about moral facts lies in its abilities to address several sources of possible error in one’s moral beliefs. One of these sources is any possible incoherence. A second is the potential undercutting ability of one’s non-moral beliefs (e.g. beliefs about the general epistemological implications of disagreement, or about the genealogy of our moral beliefs, etc.). A third is the undercutting potential of problematic biases.

2. Against Horn’s Reliability Argument from Disagreement

I will take no issue with (RAD2) or (RAD3). Instead, I shall be mounting challenges against (RAD1) and (RAD4). To do so, I will be advancing arguments for both of the following claims:

(A) The Antecedent of (RAD1) is not true: The best evidence we have of actual fundamental moral disagreements that survive employment of the method of reflective equilibrium suggests that such disagreements would not be widespread enough under idealized conditions wherein many people have flawlessly applied the method for the RAD to succeed. Thus the antecedent of (RAD1) is not true.

(B) The RAD reduces to other skeptical arguments that are not disagreement based—namely, genealogical debunking arguments—to defend (RAD1) and (RAD4): Given that sufficiently divergent initial sets of moral intuitions will lead to divergent reflective equilibria, robust realists will maintain that which reflective equilibria it is reasonable to believe are more likely to be truth-tracking depends on the plausibility of the sets of moral intuitions that eventually led to their formation. Robust realists, then, will maintain that the best conception of the method of reflective equilibrium requires that agents begin the process with moral intuitions that are already independently prima facie plausible. Consequently, they will contend that (RAD4) is false. For even if it turned out that many people’s efforts to achieve reflective equilibrium do not end up making them morally reliable, we can tell whose efforts do by which moral intuitions they started with. In addition, they will contend that (RAD1) is in danger as well. For if the moral intuitions an agent begins the process of reasoning to reflective equilibrium from are significantly determinative of the content of her moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium, robust realists can maintain that flawless employment of the best overall method plausibly could not result in significant disagreement since it requires starting from a particular set of moral intuitions. Proponents of the RAD thus need to show that we do not have a method for determining which moral intuitions are more plausible than others. To show that, however, ultimately requires showing that we have no way of determining the plausibility of intuitions based on the ways they were formed; in other words, it requires defending a type of genealogical debunking argument regarding all of our moral intuitions.
The success of (A) would render belief in the success of the RAD merely temporarily epistemically unjustified because it leaves open the possibility that future empirical evidence might be uncovered which shows that the empirical claims the RAD relies on are plausible. The success of (B), however, would show decisively that the RAD is not an independent threat to the moral realist’s attempts to accommodate moral knowledge.

2.1. Why the Antecedent of (RAD1) Is Likely False

In a footnote, Horn admits that he does not have in mind any precise amount of disagreement by the phrases “widespread,” “a significant number,” and “many” included in his presentation of the RAD. Rather than offer a precise amount, he notes that it would be implausible to believe the RAD goes through if flawless employment of the method of reflective equilibrium by every member of an idealized population resulted in each member only having one or two false moral beliefs each, or if it only resulted in 0.1% of the population being morally unreliable. However, if such flawless employment of the method resulted in more than half of the population being morally unreliable, then it’s clear that the RAD succeeds.  

Judging from these examples given by Horn, then, I shall understand Horn as maintaining that the way we should think about the RAD is that we need to take into account two aspects of the scope of disagreement: the number of moral propositions about which there is fundamental disagreement, and how split the views are in each of these moral disagreements.

So according to the RAD, since we must take into account these two aspects of the scope of disagreement, there are two sorts of scenarios that robust realists need not worry about, and one

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that they should worry about. Among the scenarios they should not worry about, the first is that widespread achievement of reflective equilibrium would result in there being a few moral skeptics whose views result in all moral propositions being subjects of disagreements. For the number of these skeptics would be too sparse to give us reason to think that views are split regarding enough moral propositions such that we should think our best method of moral inquiry is generally unreliable. The second is that widespread achievement of reflective equilibrium would result in views being evenly, or nearly evenly, split about just a few moral propositions. For the range of moral propositions there is disagreement about would be too small for us to think that our best method of moral inquiry is generally unreliable. The third scenario, which is the one robust realists should be worried about, then, is one where widespread achievement of reflective equilibrium results in disagreements obtaining over a wide range of moral propositions wherein the parties are evenly, or nearly, evenly split, since that is the scenario which has the potential of providing the sort of evidence of widespread error that the RAD needs to go through. We can assume, then, that the less likely that this third scenario obtains, the more likely it is that (A) is a successful objection to the RAD.

So what is the scope of moral disagreement that we should expect to obtain in an idealized situation where everyone achieves reflective equilibrium? I believe it is plausible that we do not have reason to expect the scope to be favorable to the RAD. As in the case of establishing that (iii) is true in responding to the Argument from Conciliationism, however, establishing that (A) is true with any certainty of course is largely an empirical undertaking. For we would of course need to first obtain credible data on the fundamental moral disagreements that obtain in the actual world in order to be in a position to assess whether those disagreements provide evidence for the truth of the antecedent of (RAD1). Some efforts have already been made to collect such data by both
philosophers and non-philosophers. And philosophers have made efforts to draw out the implications of such data for moral philosophy, though a fair amount of disagreement obtains between them about these issues. In my view, however, even the data collected thus far that has the most potential of offering support to the RAD does not provide anywhere near the amount of support needed for the RAD’s success. In defense of this claim, it will be worth discussing some of the most prominent work attempting to draw skeptical implications from such data. So in what follows in the rest of this section, I shall provide an overview of three recent studies purporting to have uncovered extant fundamental moral disagreements that are likely to survive in idealized conditions, and subsequently comment on why they do not allow for the RAD to go through.

First, then, in mounting a *metaphysical* argument from disagreement against realist metaethical views, John Doris and Alexandra Plakias cite research by psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen on the differences in attitudes between the White Non-Hispanic populations in the Northern and Southern U.S. toward violent retaliation by men in response to perceived affronts to their “honor” as evidence of extant fundamental moral disagreement that would survive in ideal conditions. Nisbett and Cohen’s research suggests that Southerners are more likely to be forgiving of violent retaliation by men to such affronts than the Northerners are. The reason is that a culture of honor that encourages males to remain a reputation of strength obtains in the Southern population that is absent in the Northern population. The reason Doris and Plakias believe it is plausible that the differences in attitudes toward retaliatory violence

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53 According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996), the Southern culture of honor arose in large part because it used to be the case in the American South that people could not count on a reliable law enforcement system to protect their property from theft. In areas where such law enforcement is lacking, it is to one’s advantage to develop a reputation for retaliation against aggression or affronts to oneself. As a result, one’s honor in the sense of such a reputation is important to maintain. Once an honor culture appears, it tends to persist even after the socioeconomic conditions under which it was economically advantageous no longer exists.
between the two populations is an example of an extant fundamental moral disagreement that would survive in idealized conditions, then, is that the differences in attitudes do not seem to be explainable by differences in beliefs about non-moral facts, rationality, or bias. It does not seem plausible, for instance, that the two groups have different views about what sorts of actions would be an affront to one’s honor, nor that they made a mistake in reasoning in arriving at their views about retaliatory violence, nor that they have different interests that might be served by a culture of honor such that they are biased toward approving of such a culture.\(^\text{54}\)

Second, Doris and Plakias also cite unpublished research results Doris, along with Peng, Nichols, and Stitch, obtained from an experiment designed to identify whether “Westerners” and “East Asians” had differing moral views that would manifest in different views about the “Magistrate and the Mob” thought experiment.\(^\text{55}\) In the thought experiment, participants are asked to imagine a town wherein a case of inter-ethnic violence occurs, though the perpetrator has yet to be identified. Participants are then told that the only way for a town’s magistrates can prevent a destructive riot that would cause great damage to members of the ethnic group that the perpetrator is thought to be member of is to falsely implicate and then imprison an innocent member from that ethnic group, so the magistrates end up taking that course of action. The thought experiment concludes with participants sharing their moral evaluation of the magistrates. Peng et. al’s experiment involved having a group of “Americans of predominantly European descent” and a separate group of “Chinese living in the People’s Republic of China” engage in the thought experiment. The responses of the group of Americans were intended to be representative “Western” moral views, whereas the responses of the Chinese group were intended to be

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\(^{55}\) Peng et. al (n.d.).
representative of “East Asian” moral views. According to the results obtained, members of the
group of Americans (“Westerners”) were more likely to believe that the magistrates did something
morally wrong. On the other hand, members of the group of Chinese (“East Asians”) were more
likely to not maintain that the magistrates are guilty of any moral wrongdoing. Instead, they were
more likely to hold the would-be rioters as the ones who were morally culpable for the innocent
person being scapegoated. Doris and Plakias claim that, like the disagreement between U.S.
Northerners and Southerners, the disagreement between the American and Chinese groups is not
explainable by differences in beliefs about non-moral facts, rationality, or bias. For both groups
seemed to have a shared understanding of what the consequences would be of scapegoating versus
not scapegoating, neither group seems more likely to have made a mistake in reasoning than the
other, and there did not seem to be reason to suspect that it would be in either group’s self-interest
to make one moral evaluation as opposed to others.

Third, Ben Fraser and Marc Hauser, in the course of pressing their own *metaphysical*
argument from disagreement, claim that a study conducted by Hauser and Linda Abarbanell on the
moral views of rural Mayan population uncovered an extant moral disagreement between that
population and Westerners that plausibly would survive in idealized conditions.56 Abarbanell and
Hauser’s research involved administering what is known as the “Moral Sense Test” (MST) to
members of a group of rural Mayans, and comparing their test results to those of Westerners. The
MST asks subjects to consider a range of scenarios which “vary according to whether a harm is
the result of action or of inaction/omission, whether the harm is necessary as a means to some end
or is a side-effect of achieving that end and whether or not the harm involves physical contact

56 Fraser and Hauser (2010, pp. 551-557). The research results by Abarbanell and Hauser are presented in their (2010).
between the agent and the victim.”\textsuperscript{57} Earlier rounds of testing on subjects identified as American, Canadian, and British—hereafter, following Fraser and Hauser, “Westerners”—found that Western subjects tend to adhere to three principles when rendering moral judgments:\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Action}: Harms caused by action are less permissible than harms caused by omission.

\textit{Contact}: Harms that involve physical contact are less permissible than harms that do not involve physical contact.

\textit{Intention [Means]}\textsuperscript{59}: Harms caused as a means to a good end are less permissible than harms that are foreseen side-effects of bringing about a good end.

According to the results of the MST tests administered to the rural Mayan population by Abarnabell and Hauser, however, it turns out that rural Mayans apparently do not endorse \textit{Action}. That is, they do not believe that the distinction between acts and omissions is a morally salient one. Knowingly allowing a harm to occur by failing to prevent its occurrence, in the view of rural Mayans, is equally morally impermissible to actively bringing about that harm oneself. Fraser and Hauser contend that the different views regarding \textit{Action} between Westerners and Mayans constitutes a disagreement, and that that disagreement plausibly would persist under idealized conditions. For the disagreement does not seem explainable by differences in beliefs about non-moral facts, rationality, or bias. The two groups seem equally able to conceptually distinguish harms resulting from acts rather than omissions, to not have differing views about causation that would cause them to classify acts and omissions differently, and to not have views about the supernatural that would affect their judgments about the scenarios described to them in the MST.

\textsuperscript{57} Fraser and Hauser (2010, p. 551).
\textsuperscript{58} See Cushman et. al (2006) for where these distinctions initially came from.
\textsuperscript{59} Fraser and Hauser (2010, p. 552) note that Cushman et. al came later to recognize that should have named the Intention principle “Means” instead because what is morally salient for this principle is not the intention of the agent committing the harm, but whether the agent committed the harm as a means to a greater good or as a side-effect of her intended action.
With accounts of those three studies on hand and interpretations of those results that would lend support to the RAD, then, we can now say why they do not provide the sort of support needed for the RAD to succeed. There are at least three reasons why they do not provide such support.

First, even assuming that each of the study results are best interpreted as uncovering extant fundamental moral disagreements that would survive in idealized conditions, it is implausible that together the results of the study show that fundamental moral disagreements in idealized conditions would be widespread in the way needed for the RAD’s success. For each of the studies aimed merely at showing that moral disagreement obtains regarding a relatively narrow topic—namely, whether retaliatory violence is morally permissible to defend one’s honor, the moral permissibility of scapegoating and the locus of moral blameworthiness for scapegoating if it is not morally permissible, and the moral salience of the act/omission distinction—as opposed to showing that there is widespread moral disagreement. Thus even supposing that the right view to take in each of these disagreements is not indeterminate, it is implausible that if these disagreements survive in idealized conditions, then realists would have to admit that those who end up being the ones with the false moral beliefs in those disagreements would end up having a set of moral beliefs wherein the number of false beliefs outnumbers the number of true ones. For if those are all of the disagreements we should expect, then we have very little reason to doubt that there would be vastly more moral agreement in idealized conditions than disagreement. To see why, recall, again, those moral propositions I claimed it was safe to assume there is vast extant agreement about in chapter 2; those agreements alone outnumber the apparent disagreements documented in the data cited by Doris and Plakias and Fraser and Hauser, and their data do not seem to give us any reason to doubt that those agreements would survive in idealized conditions.
Moreover, each of the apparent disagreements discussed in those studies rests on a background of much moral agreement between the disagreeing parties. For instance, it is plausible to assume that U.S. Northerners and Southerners agree that it is not morally permissible to engage in the sort of offensive acts that raise the issue of retaliatory violence in the first place; for it is doubtful that the reason why Northerners are less likely to judge retaliatory violence in response to such acts as morally justified is that they are more likely to think that there is nothing morally objectionable about such acts (it is instead that they think other responses are more appropriate than retaliatory violence). It is also clear that despite their apparent disagreement, the American and Chinese students believe both that, from a moral point of view, scapegoating innocent people is not something that is desirable and that it is regrettable when communities are forced into “Magistrate-and-the-Mob-like” circumstances. Furthermore, it is clear that Westerners and rural Mayans tend to agree that the harms discussed in the cases presented in the MST were morally impermissible. Unless, then, we have reasons to think that these extant agreements would dissolve in idealized conditions, we should count them as ones that would so survive. Might we have such reasons? That seems doubtful, and at the very least something that needs to be argued for by proponents of the RAD.

It is also worth adding that the data collected in those studies cited by Doris and Plakias and Fraser and Hauser were not meant to be used for something like the RAD. As was noted in passing, those authors were attempting to mount metaphysical arguments from disagreement. Their arguments were premised on the idea that metaethical realists are committed to the impossibility of it being rationally permissible for idealized moral agents to diverge in their moral

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60 Agreement also apparently obtains between them regarding the Contact and Intention principles. The radical moral skeptic might contend that this agreement would dissolve in idealized conditions, but it seems that the burden of proof is on them to defend this contention since it is not at all obvious what they might be basing that contention on.
judgments at all (though Doris and Plakias are willing to entertain the possibility that even if their
metaphysical argument from disagreement succeeds, what they call “patchy realism” might be
ture: a realism that is committed to some areas of moral discourse being realistically construed,
while others are anti-realistically construed61). So it is no surprise that the empirical data those
authors cited in support of their argument would not be suggestive of there being widespread moral
disagreement: for their purposes, they only needed to show that at least one fundamental moral
disagreement would survive in idealized conditions.

Second, it is not even entirely clear that the data cited by Doris and Plakias and Fraser and
Hausman provides evidence of actual disagreements, at least when it comes to the data on U.S.
Northerners and Southerners and the rural Mayan population. Fraser and Hausman themselves,
and Brian Leiter before them, point out that while the research on the views of U.S. Northerners
and Southerners on retaliatory violence cited by Doris and Plakias shows that Southerners are more
willing to forgive someone for retaliatory violence committed in response to an affront, it is
implausible that being forgiving of such violence is the same thing as believing it to be morally
permissible.62 So that data does not seem to provide evidence that U.S. Northerners and
Southerners are actually in disagreement about the moral status of retaliatory violence. Fraser and
Hauser note that research by Jonathan Haidt and Jonathan Baron threaten their interpretation of
the results of the MST tests taken by the rural Mayan population.63 Haidt and Baron found that

62 See Leiter (2008, pp. 334-335) and Fraser and Hausman (2010, pp. 548-549). Fraser and Hauser also argue that the
data from Nisbett and Cohen (1996) should not even be seen as providing evidence that U.S. Southerners are more
forgiving of retaliatory violence than Northerners, and so do not that construing disagreements about when forgiveness
is called for as a moral disagreement would save the status of the data as data providing evidence of moral
disagreement. As I understand their argument, they contend that that data can be interpreted as showing just that
Southerners are more willing to overlook or tolerate honor-driven violence for non-moral reasons rather than showing
that Southerners think such violence is more forgivable than Northerners.
63 Haidt and Baron (1996).
Western test subjects tend to find the action/omission distinction less morally salient in cases where the people involved are related to each other in certain ways in terms of “hierarchy” or “solidarity.” The hierarchical aspect of a relationship refers to the relative social rank of the people in the relationship, whereas the solidarity aspect of a relationship refers to the personal closeness of the relationship. In cases where the hierarchical relationship is more unequal, as in the case of a boss-employee relationship, subjects tended to view the act/omission distinction as less morally salient for assessing the acts of the superior. Subjects also tend to view the act/omission distinction as less morally salient for assessing the actions of an agent in cases where the person affected by the agent’s actions were close friends or family members. Fraser and Hauser believe it is possible that the apparent lack of endorsement of the act/omission distinction by the rural Mayans is explainable by rural Mayans having a tendency to view other Mayans as being in the sort of relationship to each other that Western test subjects tended to view as mitigating the moral salience of that distinction as a result of living in small communities. For the MST tests designed for the rural Mayan test group included vignettes for them to react to which explicitly specified that the harm being done was by Mayans to other Mayans, and so it is possible that Mayans thought the act/omission distinction to not be salient in the cases described in the vignettes for that reason. Fraser and Hauser thus leave it an open question whether that is the best explanation of rural Mayans lack of endorsement of the act/omission distinction as a morally salient one (though they believe the burden of proof is on realists to explain why it is).\textsuperscript{64}

Third, and perhaps most importantly, even granting that the data cited by those authors provide evidence of actual extant moral disagreements, that data does not plausibly provide evidence of moral disagreements that would survive \textit{flawless application of the method of} \textsuperscript{64}Fraser and Hauser (2010, pp. 555-556).
reflective equilibrium given that what is perhaps the most popular account of moral psychology is the correct one.\textsuperscript{65}

According to what is called the dual-process model of moral cognition, human moral psychology exhibits two types of cognitive processes: System 1 processes and System 2 processes.\textsuperscript{66} System 1 processes are fast, automatic, and generate moral intuitions in responses to cases\textsuperscript{67} nonconsciously (i.e., in ways that are not consciously accessible). System 2 processes, on the other hand, are slow, controlled, and are consciously accessible. System 1 processes are typically considered to be strongly linked to emotion and to lead one to making moral judgments in a largely non-rational way, or at least in a way such that the reasons for one’s moral judgments are not consciously accessible. Given its characteristics, System 1 processes are often considered to be responsible for how children imbibe the moral norms that are operative in the social environments they frequent, and how people passively adopt to moral norms through frequent exposure to them. In contrast, System 2 processes are typically thought to be what enables our capacity to engage in discursive moral reasoning—i.e. it enables us to arrive at moral judgments via methods that involve clearly articulating moral claims and reflecting on their implications—so as to actively and deliberatively arrive at certain moral judgments. A popular view among dual-process theorists is that while the operation of System 2 processes is able to discredit and overwrite moral judgments that accord with moral intuitions formed via System 1 processes, as well as

\textsuperscript{65} Much of what follows in my presentation of the third reason why the work of Doris and Plakias and Fraser and Hauser do not lend sufficient support for the success of the RAD follows the arguments made by Simon Fitzpatrick in Fitzpatrick (2014), wherein Fitzpatrick argued directly against the metaphysical argument from disagreement advanced by Doris and Plakias (though Fitzpatrick notes that his arguments apply equally well to the metaphysical argument from disagreement defended by Fraser and Hauser).

\textsuperscript{66} For a list of works of those who have defended a dual-process view of moral psychology, see Sripada and Stitch (2007), Saunders (2009), Cushman et. al (2010) and Kahane (2012).

\textsuperscript{67} The dual-process model does not assume that moral intuitions are the type of psychological states that can non-inferentially confer a positive epistemic status to beliefs with the contents of those moral intuitions, as moral intuitionists in philosophy have traditionally maintained.
influence the very content of one’s moral intuitions (and so enable an agent to bring their previously discordant sense of what intuitively seems to be the case morally into accord with their conscious moral beliefs), most peoples’ moral judgments are merely reflections of System 1 produced intuitions that have yet to be interrogated by System 2 processes. The reason is that System 1 processes operate quickly and without much effort on the part of an agent, while engaging in System 2 processes tends to be taxing because System 2 processes tend to be slow and cognitively demanding.

The dual-process view of moral psychology lends itself well as an empirical account of the psychological mechanisms that enable human moral agents to engage in the sort of moral reasoning that is constitutive of the method of reflective equilibrium. For it is plausible that System 1 processes are what enable human moral agents to acquire a starting fund of moral intuitions that lead them to form their initial set of moral judgments. And it is plausible that System 2 processes are what enable them to further systematize that set of moral judgments by removing logical inconsistencies, and through any other strategies for increasing the overall coherence and evidential support their beliefs lend to one another so as to bring their beliefs closer to a state resembling the reflective equilibrium ideal. If, however, the dual-process view of moral psychology accurately describes what enables human moral agents to engage in the method of reflective equilibrium, then we have reason to believe that most people have made very little progress at actually bringing their moral views into reflective equilibrium. For, if the popular view is correct, most people have not come to reflectively endorse the moral judgments they hold after scrutinizing those beliefs via the application of System 2 processes because most people have not engaged in the sort of deliberative moral reasoning that is constitutive of System 2 processes at all.
If we should believe that most people do not have such reflectively endorsed moral beliefs, however, then it seems that we should believe that extant moral disagreements are *prima facie* not good evidence of disagreements that would survive in idealized conditions wherein there is widespread flawless application of the method of reflective equilibrium. In other words, our default position should be to assume that any extant moral disagreement is one that is between people who have made significant progress toward bringing their moral views into reflective equilibrium. For our default position should be to assume that any extant moral disagreements are merely the result of clashes in judgments that merely reflect uncritically endorsed System 1 produced moral intuitions. Such judgments are not ones that are the outcome of applying the method of reflective equilibrium.

Insofar, then, that the (what we are assuming are genuine) moral disagreements uncovered in the cases cited by Doris and Plakias and Fraser and Hauser are not ones we have special reason to think are clashes in moral beliefs that are reflectively endorsed after the application of System 2 processes, then the *prima facie* presumption against such disagreements being ones that would survive in idealized conditions wherein there is widespread flawless application of the method of reflective equilibrium stands. Do we have any such reasons? While it cannot be ruled out definitively that such reasons exist, showing that they exist will be a steep uphill battle for proponents of the RAD for at least two reasons. First, the most obvious thing to do for proponents of the RAD is to show that we do have good evidence that the test subjects in the cases cited by Doris and Plakias and Fraser and Hauser shared moral beliefs that were reflectively endorsed after application of System 2 processes. One way of doing that would be to show that those test subjects were people who had professions or lifestyles, such as being a professional academic moral
philosopher,\textsuperscript{68} that would have encouraged spending time critically reflecting on their beliefs about moral issues. But we seem to lack any reason to believe that the test subjects were such people (they seem to have all been “the folk,” as philosophers sometimes say). Second, one might try to show that the dual-process view of moral psychology is false, and that another view which gives us reason to believe that more people have brought their moral beliefs into reflective equilibrium than the dual-process view suggests is more plausible. As was mentioned above, however, the dual-process view is perhaps the most popular account of moral psychology, and it seems to be well-supported by the best current empirical evidence on how humans typically reason about moral matters. So proponents of the RAD have their work cut out for them if they decide to argue that the dual-process view should be rejected.

Thus while some research has been done to uncover extant fundamental moral disagreements that would survive in more idealized conditions, it is implausible that even the best of that research provides the sort of empirical evidence the RAD needs to succeed for at least three reasons. First, even granting that that research uncovers extant fundamental moral disagreements, it does not provide us good reason to believe that such disagreements have reached the sort of scope needed for the RAD to go through. Second, it is not even clear that that research has uncovered actual moral disagreements. Third, again granting that that research has uncovered actual moral disagreements, it has not provided us good evidence that those disagreements are ones that would survive if there was widespread achievement of reflective equilibrium.

\textbf{2.2. Why the RAD Ultimately Reduces to Genealogical Debunking Arguments}

\textsuperscript{68} Though it is of course debatable whether even such philosophers have brought their views anywhere near reflective equilibrium.
Besides all of the various problems associated with the empirical evidence relied upon by the RAD discussed in §2.1, a more significant problem confronts the RAD. That problem is that premises (RAD1) and (RAD4) of the RAD are only plausible if any epistemic justification we have for the truth-tracking ability of some of our moral intuitions is already defeated by genealogical debunking arguments. Here is a restatement of those premises for the ease of the reader:

(RAD1) If there is widespread fundamental moral disagreement, then many people would have a significant number of false moral beliefs even if they were to flawlessly employ our best method of moral inquiry [i.e. the method of moral reflective equilibrium].

(RAD4) It is not the case that any of us has special reason to believe that the best method of moral inquiry is reliable in our own case [or anyone else’s].

To see why the plausibility of these premises is ultimately dependent on the plausibility of genealogical debunking arguments, we can run through the robust realist’s best way of undercutting the plausibility of those two premises. We will see that proponents of the RAD ultimately will have to turn to genealogical debunking arguments to motivate (RAD1) and (RAD4) in light of robust realists’ best way of undercutting those premises.

2.2.1. The Robust Realist’s Best Way of Undercutting (RAD1) and (RAD4)

What the RAD ultimately boils down to is a challenge to realists to explain how even if we know that there is a lot of moral disagreement between those who have achieved reflective equilibrium, in at least some cases of disagreement between such individuals (wherein the disputed proposition has a determinate truth value) we can reach epistemically justified beliefs about who is more likely to be holding the correct belief (and why we are epistemically justified in believing that all such disagreeing interlocutors are reliable about matters they are in agreement about). That is, it is a challenge to explain how even if we know that there is a lot of moral disagreement
between those who formed their moral beliefs in light of all of the relevant non-moral facts, without a lapse in procedural rationality, and without being problematically affected by bias, in at least some cases of disagreement between such individuals (wherein the disputed proposition has a determinate truth value) we can reach epistemically justified beliefs about who is more likely to be holding the correct belief. The thought is that if we cannot point out a salient difference which speaks in favor of one party’s belief in a moral disagreement when all of the parties to the dispute hold a perfectly consistent set of moral beliefs and are in agreement over the non-moral facts, and if such disagreements are common enough, then we are not in a position to justifiably say who is likely to be holding the correct belief about any moral proposition.

The best response robust realists can give to this challenge is to first note that on any plausible conception of the method of reflective equilibrium (as a method for gaining access to realistically construed truths) the mere fact that one’s moral beliefs are in reflective equilibrium is not enough to confer epistemic justification on them. What really matters is how an agent reaches reflective equilibrium.\(^6\) In particular, since different agents will almost certainly reach divergent reflective equilibria if they take moral intuitions that are sufficiently divergent as the starting points of their moral reasoning—an assumption Horn makes,\(^7\) and which I will simply grant here—the prima facie plausibility that an agent’s moral intuitions have independently of having been retained after subjected to the procedures for achieving reflective equilibrium (or, hereafter, “independent prima facie plausibility” for short) plays a prominent role in determining the overall epistemic credentials of an agent’s moral beliefs held in reflective equilibrium. If an agent begins the process with a set of hopelessly deranged—or, less dramatically, sufficiently non-truth-tracking—moral

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\(^6\) Scanlon (2003, pp. 152-153; 2014, pp. 79-84) has emphasized this repeatedly in his discussions of the method of reflective equilibrium.

\(^7\) Horn (2017, p. 373).
intuitions that will inevitably lead them to endorse a set of false moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium, then of course she will be morally unreliable even if she did bring her moral beliefs into reflective equilibrium; and if we had good reason to believe that her final set of moral judgments in large part reflects her independently implausible initial moral intuitions, then we would have good reason to judge her moral beliefs held in reflective equilibrium to be unreliable. Conversely, if an agent begins the process with moral intuitions that are largely on track with respect to the moral truths, then she will be more likely to end up with a set of moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium that is largely truth-tracking; and we would have good reason to have confidence in her moral beliefs held in reflective equilibrium if we had good reason to believe that they were the refined outcome of independently prima facie plausible starting moral intuitions.

For robust realists, then, if our best method of moral inquiry should be seen as some sort of method of reflective equilibrium, then it should not be seen as a version of the method that maintains that in order to be maximally epistemically responsible in forming her moral beliefs, an agent merely has to ensure that her moral beliefs form a coherent set in reflective equilibrium—such a version of the method is what the RAD needs to saddle robust realists with. Instead, the best conception of the method must also account for the independent prima facie plausibility of one’s initial moral intuitions. Consequently, for robust realists, in addition to the procedures for increasing the overall coherence of one’s set of moral beliefs, the best conception of the method of reflective equilibrium will include procedures for determining which moral intuitions one should begin one’s reasoning from in the first place.

Robust realists will ultimately contend that two things follow if they are able to successfully motivate their preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium—i.e., the one that requires beginning with more or less independently prima facie plausible intuitions. First,
(RAD4) is false. The reason is that even if there were many moral disagreements among those who have achieved reflective equilibrium, we would still be able to acquire good reasons to believe that some of the disagreeing interlocutors in these disagreements are more likely than the others to be holding the correct belief about the matters under dispute. For we would be able to assess the plausibility of the different lines of moral reasoning that led to the divergent reflective equilibria by assessing the independent _prima facie_ plausibility of the different moral intuitions those lines of moral reasoning started from. Through such assessments, we could acquire good reasons to judge some parties to a moral disagreement to be more likely to be holding the correct belief about the matter under dispute than the other parties even if the moral beliefs of each of the parties to the disagreement were in reflective equilibrium. Thus it is not true, as (RAD4) claims, that we could not have good reasons to believe that some agents involved in a moral disagreement were more likely to be holding the correct belief about the matter under dispute than their opponents when all of the parties to the disagreement have achieved reflective equilibrium.

Now robust realists could only advance the line of reasoning in the preceding paragraph if it were the case that we have good reason to believe that the contents of an agent’s moral beliefs endorsed in reflective equilibrium would be sufficiently similar to the contents of the moral intuitions they reasoned their way to reflective equilibrium from—or, more narrowly, that an agent’s moral beliefs endorsed in reflective equilibrium would be sufficiently similar to the contents of the moral intuitions they reasoned their way to reflective equilibrium from _if they started with independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions_. The reason is that if our method for determining the plausibility of a set of moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium involves our ability to determine the independent _prima facie_ plausibility of the moral intuitions from which those moral beliefs were reached, then we better have a way for determining what particular sets
of beliefs those moral intuitions ultimately would support holding if subjected to the procedures for achieving reflective equilibrium. For if the same set of moral intuitions would result in sufficiently divergent reflective equilibria when put through the various procedures for achieving reflective equilibrium by different agents, then it is plausible that we would not be in a position to say that those moral intuitions support any particular set of moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium (or several slightly divergent reflective equilibria). Thus we would not be in a position to say that any independent prima facie plausibility those intuitions had would transfer to any particular set of reflective equilibrium countenanced moral beliefs more so than others. And winding up not being in such a position plausibly means winding up in a position where any independent prima facie justification one had for the moral intuitions that led to the divergent reflective equilibria is defeated. For the prima facie plausibility of those moral intuitions comes from their potential for tracking the moral truths. If we have good reason to believe that reasoning from those moral intuitions would lead agents to widely divergent reflective equilibria, however, then we seem to have good reason to think they are not actually truth-tracking. After all, starting the process of moral reasoning from them should not lead many agents to drastically different moral conclusions—and thus many agents to a state of being in significant moral error—if holding them actually does orient agents to reason their way toward the moral truths.

Fortunately for the robust realist, in the context of responding to the RAD, it is legitimate to suppose that flawless employment of their preferred method of the conception of reflective equilibrium would not lead to reflective equilibria that are sufficiently divergent in a way that would spell trouble for the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs—in other words, it is legitimate for them to suppose that (RAD1) is false. For it is a presupposition of the RAD that in all cases, the moral intuitions an agent reasons from to achieve reflective equilibrium will play a
significant role in determining the contents of the reflective equilibrium she achieves. It is that presupposition which allows the proponent of the RAD to claim that if agents have widely divergent moral intuitions, then they will end up with widely divergent reflective equilibria. Thus robust realists can help themselves to that presupposition and claim that different agents who begin their moral reasoning from the independently prima facie plausible set of starting moral intuitions will not end up at divergent reflective equilibria in a way that undercuts each of their moral beliefs.

Proponents of the RAD might try to get around this problem by dropping that presupposition. But dropping that presupposition is not an attractive option for them for at least two reasons that are related to each other. First, if that presupposition is dropped, robust realists will simply claim that while not all moral intuitions will be largely determinative of the contents of an agent’s reflective equilibrium, some will be as long as agents are reasoning from them in a rational way, namely, the independently prima facie plausible ones. And if that were true only about the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions, we should expect all agents to eventually reach a particular reflective equilibrium (or reflective equilibria that were merely slightly divergent in way that fails to threaten the epistemic justification of moral beliefs for robust realists) since no agent would reach reflective equilibrium prior to those intuitions entering into the content of their moral reasoning. There would thus be no threat from disagreement for robust realists to worry about. Proponents of the RAD might try, then, to close off that possibility for the robust realist by presupposing that all moral intuitions will fail to be significantly determinative of the contents of an agent’s moral beliefs held in reflective equilibrium even if she reasons from them rationally; thus even if different agents each reason rationally from plausible moral intuitions, we should expect them to reach significantly divergent reflective equilibria. But—and this is the second reason—robust realists have no reason to grant that presupposition since it is highly
question-begging. For making that presupposition pretty much amounts to claiming that even the most rational moral reasoning is so hopelessly erratic that we should never expect even the most rational moral agents to agree on much (or at least not to come to agreements on many moral matters because of rational moral reasoning). This claim begs the question in that it assumes what the RAD should be trying to prove, namely, that agents would reach widely divergent moral beliefs even when they all are perfectly rational in their moral reasoning. Thus robust realists can insist on helping themselves to the presupposition that the contents of an agent’s reflective equilibrium will be significantly determined by the moral intuitions they began the process of reasoning to reflective equilibrium with both because the RAD helps itself to that presupposition, and robust realists can justifiably take objection to alternatives to that presupposition which might be favorable to the RAD.

With that being said, for the sake of clarity, let me spell out again, but more succinctly, what I have claimed to be the robust realist’s best way of challenging (RAD1) and (RAD4) before I go on to say why proponents of the RAD will need the help of genealogical debunking arguments to deal with the robust realist’s best way of challenging those premises. The first component of the robust realist’s challenge is to defend a particular conception of the method of reflective equilibrium as the most plausible conception, namely, the one which includes resources for identifying the moral intuitions from which it is independently prima facie plausible to begin the process of reasoning one’s way into reflective equilibrium. For on that conception, (RAD4) comes out false because our best method of moral inquiry contains resources for determining which agents are more likely to have moral beliefs that are reliably formed than others, namely, those agents who reached reflective equilibrium via moral reasoning from the moral intuitions it is independently prima facie plausible to start reasoning from. Of course, that conception is only
plausible if the contents of the moral intuitions an agent reasons from to achieve reflective equilibrium are significantly determinative of the contents of her moral beliefs in reflective equilibrium. Since, however, the RAD presupposes that the moral intuitions an agent reasons from to reflective equilibrium are so determinative—and there are strong reasons against dropping this presupposition—robust realists can help themselves to that presupposition in the context of responding to the RAD. And the combination of that presupposition with the robust realists preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium entails that (RAD1) is false. The reason is that the combination entails that even if we had reason to believe that agents who begin with significantly divergent moral intuitions would reach significantly divergent reflective equilibria, that would not give us reason to believe that the agents who flawlessly employ the robust realist’s preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium—which requires that agents start with their moral reasoning from the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions—in particular would also reach significantly divergent reflective equilibria, and so would be in significant disagreement with one another. And because plausible moral intuitions for robust realists are, by definition, one’s we have reason to think are truth-tracking, since an agent’s flawless employment of the robust realist’s preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium results in her having a set of moral beliefs that inherits the plausibility of her moral intuitions (and gains plausibility from having inconsistencies eliminated), robust realists will maintain that we do not have good reason to believe that agents who flawlessly employ their preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium would be holding many false beliefs.

2.2.2. Why the RAD Ultimately Depends on Genealogical Debunking Arguments to Resist the Robust Realist’s Attempts to Undercut (RAD1) and (RAD4)
It is now time to show why the RAD ultimately reduces to genealogical debunking arguments. The strategy for doing so is straightforward. I will first describe what the proponent of the RAD needs to do in order to show that the robust realist’s best way of challenging (RAD1) and (RAD4) fails. I will then show why proponents of the RAD will need to appeal to considerations that have nothing essentially to do with moral disagreement—namely, the considerations appealed to by genealogical debunking arguments—in order to do what they need to do to show that robust realists cannot undercut the plausibility of (RAD1) and (RAD4).

What proponents of the RAD ultimately need to do in order to show that the robust realist’s best line of reasoning for challenging (RAD1) and (RAD4) fails is actually not too hard to see. They need to show that robust realists have no plausible way of distinguishing between which moral intuitions are independently *prima facie* plausible from which moral intuitions are not. By showing that, they would stifle the robust realist’s attempt to motivate their preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium, and thereby prevent the robust realist’s efforts to challenge (RAD1) and (RAD4) from even “getting off the ground,” as it were.

From here to the end of this section, I will be concerned with defending the following line of reasoning: To show that the robust realist has no plausible way of distinguishing between which moral intuitions are independently *prima facie* plausible and which moral intuitions are not, the proponent of the RAD will ultimately need to appeal to the considerations that are characteristically appealed to by genealogical debunking arguments. For it is ultimately the inability to distinguish independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions from implausible ones based on their respective genealogies which would spell trouble for robust realists’ efforts to motivate their preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium. For that reason, it turns out that the RAD ultimately reduces to genealogical debunking arguments.
I will motivate the line of reasoning in the previous paragraph by considering and rejecting the ways proponents of the RAD might try to show that robust realists have no plausible way of distinguishing between which moral intuitions are independently *prima facie* plausible and which moral intuitions are not without ultimately having to concede that the RAD reduces to genealogical debunking arguments. Before doing that, however, I should say a bit about what genealogical debunking arguments are.\(^{71}\) Genealogical debunking arguments attempt to undercut, or “debunk,” the epistemic credentials of a belief by showing that we do not have good reason to believe that it is truth-tracking given what we should believe about the history of how it was actually formed—i.e. the belief’s “genealogy.” Doing so involves showing that we have good reason to believe that the best explanation of how the belief was formed does *not* assume that the belief is truth-tracking. Aimed particularly at stifling the attempts of robust realists to motivate their preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium, then, genealogical debunking arguments would try to establish that we do not have good reasons for thinking any moral intuitions are independently *prima facie* plausible because we have good reasons to think all of them are rendered equally epistemically suspect by their respective genealogies (hereafter, when I speak of genealogical debunking arguments, I should be understood as talking about the particular sort of genealogical debunking arguments just described). For, the thought goes, none of our moral intuitions have a genealogy that suggests that they are factive.

The crucial thing to note for my argument here is that the success of genealogical debunking arguments against our ability to determine what the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions are would provide a non-question-begging basis for resisting the robust realist’s

\(^{71}\) There will be a fuller explication of genealogical debunking arguments in the next chapter, wherein those arguments will be the center of attention. The description of the argument contained in this paragraph, however, should be sufficient for the purposes of the argument of this subsection.
best way of challenging (RAD1) and (RAD4). My contention is that the proponent of the RAD’s only other potential alternatives to relying on genealogical debunking arguments to achieve that end would be question-begging. Thus proponents of the RAD have no choice but to depend on genealogical debunking arguments.

In defense of my contention, I shall show why what I believe are the only two potential strategies one might employ to show how the RAD does not depend on genealogical debunking arguments to resist the robust realist’s undercutting strategy against (RAD1) and (RAD4) fail. The first is to deny that the robust realist’s preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium is even a plausible moral methodology at all because it is not a plausible conception of the method reflective equilibrium. The second is to try and show that disagreement over what the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions are is what really undercuts the efforts of robust realists to identify these intuitions. I shall consider each strategy in turn.

How might the proponent of the RAD convince us that the robust realist’s preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium is not a plausible conception of the method of reflective equilibrium? The thought might be that the robust realist’s preferred conception, by requiring that an agent begins with moral intuitions that are independently prima facie plausible, is too foundationalist to be a type of method of reflective equilibrium at all. For, the thought goes, methods of reflective equilibrium should maintain that the source of a belief’s justification comes solely from how well it coheres with one’s other beliefs; in other words, no beliefs are non-inferentially justified. Since the robust realist’s conception of the method does maintain that there are sources of non-inferential justification for our moral beliefs, namely, the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions, it is for that reason that that conception should be rejected.
The reason that line of reasoning is question begging is that it assumes without argument that the method of reflective equilibrium must be coherentist. That assumption is not at all uncontroversial, as there are several philosophers who explicitly defend moderately foundationalist conceptions of the method of reflective equilibrium which maintain, like the conception I have claimed robust realists would defend, that the intuitions one reasons from to reflective equilibrium must have some independent plausibility.\textsuperscript{72} So that line of reasoning will need to be supplemented by other considerations. What might these be? Perhaps the thought is that a method only counts as a method of reflective equilibrium if it allows that all beliefs are in principle open to revision, and foundationalist variants of the method of reflective equilibrium cannot allow that because they must maintain that beliefs based on the independently \textit{prima facie} plausible intuitions cannot be revised. But \textit{moderately} foundationalist conceptions of the method can allow such beliefs to be revised because they do not maintain that the independently \textit{prima facie} plausible moral intuitions are infallible truth-trackers: these conceptions maintain that while intuitions non-inferentially confer \textit{prima facie} epistemic justification to belief in the contents of those intuitions, this justification is defeasible.\textsuperscript{73} Perhaps the thought is that methods of reflective equilibrium \textit{should be defined} as ones that do not allow for beliefs to be justified non-inferentially. A dispute over that claim, however, threatens to be a purely verbal one. Rather than object to it, then, robust realists should maintain that if methods of reflective equilibrium should be defined in that way, then so much the worse for methods of reflective equilibrium; for it thus turns out our best method of moral inquiry is not such a method, but whatever we should call what I have been calling the robust realist’s preferred conception of the method of reflective equilibrium if we stop

\textsuperscript{72} See, e.g., Huemer (2005), McMahan (2013), Ebertz (1996), and Pust (2000).

\textsuperscript{73} On Huemer’s view (2005, p. 273 note 21), however, not all foundational beliefs based on intuition are fallible.
calling it such a method (and if method of reflective equilibrium should not be defined in that way, then robust realists can insist that their preferred conception of such methods is the best).

The second potential alternative for showing that robust realists have no plausible way of distinguishing between which moral intuitions are independently prima facie plausible and which moral intuitions are not mentioned above is more promising. According to this second alternative, it is ultimately disagreement between the relevant sorts of agents over what the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions are that ultimately defeats our justification for thinking we can identify any such intuitions. What might the argument for that claim look like? We might think of it as a higher-order version of the RAD. The argument would claim that we have good reason to believe that the amount of disagreement over what the independently prima facie plausible intuitions are between agents that are epistemically symmetrical in the relevant ways is sufficient to show that we are generally unreliable at identifying what those intuitions are. It would then pair that claim with the claim that we do not have any special reasons for thinking any one of us is an exception to the norm of being unreliable at identifying the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions to get the conclusion that none of us are epistemically justified about what those intuitions are.

The problem for this second alternative is that we would only have reason to believe that everyone is epistemically badly off with respect to the independently prima facie plausible moral intuitions if we already had antecedent reason to believe that no moral intuitions are being formed in a way that suggests they are factive. In other words, we would need to already have good reason to believe that there were no relevant differences between moral intuitions in their respective genealogies that would give us reason to believe that at least some of our intuitions are truth-tracking. That is to say we would need to already have good reason to believe that genealogical
debunking arguments have already debunked each of our moral intuitions. We can see that that is so by taking note of both what the consequences would be if genealogical debunking arguments failed, and what the consequences would be if they succeeded.

Consider first what is implied by the failure of genealogical debunking arguments. Were it the case that genealogical debunking arguments fail, then it is clear that robust realists need not worry about disagreement over what the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions are undercutting our ability to identify those intuitions. For the failure of genealogical debunking arguments entails that there are some moral intuitions whose respective genealogies *does* give us reason to believe that those moral intuitions are factive. Thus when disagreements about the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions occur, they can be settled by identifying if the intuitions under dispute have genealogies which would give us reason to believe they are factive. Were a moral intuition’s genealogy to give us good reason to believe the intuition is factive, the persistence of disagreement over the plausibility of the intuition would not undercut our epistemic justification for thinking that it is plausible.

Consider next what is implied by the success of genealogical debunking arguments. One might think that even if these arguments succeed, there would still be room for considerations about disagreement to contribute skeptical “oomph” against our ability to identify the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions. But that is not the case. For any apparent epistemic significance a disagreement over what those moral intuitions are may have is parasitic on whether we ought to believe that the intuitions under dispute each have genealogies which render them epistemically suspect. We can see that they are so parasitic by drawing on the considerations raised in the previous paragraph. Those considerations suggest that whenever considerations about disagreement over the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions
are raised, it would be reasonable for robust realists to ask about the genealogies of the moral intuitions under dispute. If it turns out that those intuitions have genealogies which give us reason to think they are factive, then the disagreements over them do not threaten their epistemic credentials. If it turns out that those intuitions have genealogies which do not give us reason to think they are truth-tracking, then it would be that fact about their genealogies which undercuts their epistemic credentials, not the fact that there is disagreement over them (between the relevant sort of agents). The reason is that until we have reason to believe that a moral intuition’s genealogy renders it epistemically suspect, the mere fact that disagreement obtains over the intuition would not give us reason to doubt its epistemic credentials because the possibility remains that its genealogy is factive.

The best response proponents of the RAD might give against my line of reasoning against the second alternative involves trying to do some “table-turning.” What I mean by that is that they might try and show that worries about the genealogies of our moral intuitions ultimately reduce to worries about disagreement over them rather than vice versa (as I have contended). That is, they might try to show that were it not the case that we should be worried that someone might disagree with us and we would have no way of telling which of us is more likely to be right about a matter under dispute, we would not have reasons to worry about the genealogies of our beliefs regarding that matter.

Unfortunately for proponents of the RAD, there are at least two good reasons for thinking this table-turning strategy will not succeed. First, the cases where genealogical considerations are epistemically relevant outstrip cases where considerations about disagreement even potentially might apply. The best example of such cases are cases where disagreement is not possible, yet genealogical considerations are still epistemically relevant. Suppose, for example, that an evil
demon uses their malevolent powers to make it so that all humans without fail believe that $p$ for the set of reasons $r$. Due to the evil demon’s powers, there will never be disagreements about whether $r$ provides a good justificatory basis for believing $p$. Still, genealogical worries about the belief that $p$ would still be plausible because it would still make sense to worry that $r$ is not in fact a good justificatory basis for believing $p$.

Second, even the best sort of intuition pumping strategy that is supposed to make it intuitive that genealogical worries are always parasitic on worries about disagreement do not do so plausibly. This strategy involves presenting pairs of cases together that are similar except that one case involves disagreement while the other does not, and then attempting to show that the apparent potential undercutting force present in both cases is the result of the epistemic significance of disagreement. Such a strategy was employed recently in papers by Roger White and Andreas Mogensen. To illustrate the strategy, I will present a few cases inspired by some by Roger White (whose cases were based on some originally by G.A. Cohen).

Consider, then, this pair of cases:

*Real Grad School Rival*: Oxford and Harvard both have doctorate programs in philosophy. Students who attend Oxford’s program overwhelmingly tend to graduate believing in the analytic/synthetic distinction. In contrast, students who attend Harvard’s program overwhelmingly tend to graduate *not* believing in the analytic/synthetic distinction. The quality of education received by students at each schools is pretty much the same: faculty at each school are of comparable quality, and they assign pretty much the same readings on the analytic/synthetic distinction. The students at each school are also of comparable quality. Andrew and Cindy are graduates of Oxford and Harvard respectively, and they believe and do *not* believe in the analytic/synthetic distinction respectively. They meet and learn of their disagreement. They also share with each other information about the circumstances at each other’s schools.

*Possible Grad School Rival*: The same circumstances obtain at Oxford and Harvard as in *Real Grad School Rival* except that Cindy decided to attend law school rather than

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74 See White (2010) and Mogensen (2016a).
75 White (2010, pp. 606-607).
76 Cohen (2000).
Harvard’s doctorate program in philosophy. Thus when Andrew and Cindy meet, they do not discover a disagreement over the analytic/synthetic distinction (Cindy does not have a definite view on the matter). Andrew, however, acquires good reason to believe that had Cindy chosen to study philosophy at Harvard, she would have disagreed with him about the analytic/synthetic distinction.

The thought is that while genealogical debunking arguments would maintain that the potential source of undercutting defeat in the above cases lies ultimately in the details of the schooling received by Andrew and Cindy—their schooling being the relevant genealogical details about their beliefs in these cases—they would be wrong to maintain that. For any worries about the genealogies of their beliefs are ultimately parasitic on worries that they might encounter disagreements which would leave them and us in a position where we are unable to justifiably say who is more likely to be right. That genealogical worries are parasitic in that way is supposed to be clearer in *Real Grad School Rival*. For we are supposed to be able to see that what really has the potential to undercut Andrew’s (and/or Cindy’s) belief about the analytic/synthetic distinction is that Andrew’s disagreement with Cindy (and *mutatis mutandis* for Cindy) might leave him in a position where he would not be able to say whether he is more likely to be right about the analytic/synthetic distinction than someone who is in disagreement with him about it: genealogical worries arise only after we recognize the potential for such disagreement. It is less clear that something similar can be said about *Possible Grad School Rival* since there is no actual disagreement in that case. But, the thought goes, we can see that the undercutting potential in that case is due to disagreement because we can see that the reason Andrew’s belief might be undercut is that there is a live threat that he *would* encounter a disagreement over the analytic/synthetic distinction that would leave him uncertain about the correct view about the analytic/synthetic distinction were it not for some background factor that prevented a disagreement from being
actualized without affecting the epistemic significance of that possible disagreement. It is the
awareness of the threat of such disagreement which makes genealogical worries seem reasonable.

To see why we should reject the line of reasoning spelled out in the previous paragraph, it
will help to start by considering a third case:

*Bogus Grad School Rival:* The same circumstances obtain as in *Real Grad School Rival,*
except that the reason why Harvard students graduate not believing in the analytic/synthetic
distinction is because of drugs given to them by their diabolical philosophy professors.
Andrew knows about those circumstances at Harvard, and knows that Cindy was one of
the students given the drugs by the Harvard professors.

I think it is clear that in *Bogus Grad School Rival,* we have good reason to believe that were
Andrew should not feel any epistemic angst over a disagreement with Cindy about the
analytic/synthetic distinction. Why? Precisely because, unless we are already assuming that an
Oxford education in philosophy is not a reliable means to get to the truth about the
analytic/synthetic distinction, it is clear that there is good reason to believe that the genealogy of
Cindy’s belief about the analytic/synthetic distinction renders it epistemically suspect in a way that
the genealogy of Andrew’s belief does not. That asymmetry results in their not being a rational
requirement for Andrew to lower confidence in his belief about the analytic/synthetic distinction
in the face of disagreement with Cindy over his belief. For it results in him having good grounds
to think that he is more likely to be right in their disagreement. What the preceding considerations
about *Bogus Grad School Rival* suggest is that the epistemic significance of disagreement in that
case is actually parasitic on genealogical worries rather than vice versa.

I believe that those considerations give us good reason to believe something similar about
the other two grad school cases above. For, in light of what we should believe about *Bogus Grad
School Rival,* it seems what is really doing the epistemic heavy lifting in the other two grad school
cases is a smuggled in assumption that the genealogy of Andrew’s belief renders it no less epistemically suspect than the genealogy of Cindy’s belief (or would-be belief). Were we not already assuming that the respective genealogies of both Andrew and Cindy’s belief in *Real Grad School Rival* (i.e. the Oxford philosophy education versus the Harvard one) rendered them both comparatively epistemically suspect, for instance, what reason would we have to believe that we would not be able to tell which of the them was more likely to right in a disagreement between them? None it seems. We would similarly lack reason to believe that we would be unable to tell who is more likely to be right in the merely potential disagreement between Andrew and Cindy in *Possible Grad School Rival* were we not already making a similar assumption about Andrew and Cindy in that case (*mutatis mutandis* for the fact that there is no actual disagreement in that case).

At this point, I do not believe there are any other resources left for the proponent of the RAD to carry out the table-turning strategy successfully. Perhaps one might grant that the apparent epistemic significance of disagreement over the independently *prima facie* plausible moral intuitions always bottoms out in genealogical worries about those intuitions, but try to show that such disagreements are of epistemic significance despite not being of *independent* epistemic significance. One might, for example, try to show that whenever disagreements arise about these intuitions and we seem to have no basis for justifiably deeming some of the disagreeing parties more likely to be right than the others, that gives us at least one good reason to be alert to genealogical worries we should have.

Fair enough. But the claim that worries about disagreement over what the fundamental moral intuitions are ultimately reduces to worries that none of our moral intuitions have genealogies which suggest that they are truth-tracking would still stand. And it would still be the case that rather than concentrate on the features of a disagreement over the independently *prima*
facie plausible moral intuitions to see check the epistemic credentials of those intuitions, robust realists instead should concentrate on investigating the genealogies of those disputed intuitions. Robust realists, of course, would still need to address these genealogical concerns if they are to vindicate the epistemic credentials of our moral beliefs. They could do so, however, without also having to worry about an independent challenge from the RAD.\textsuperscript{77}

3. Conclusion

As with the Argument from Conciliationism, I have argued that the RAD fails due to both empirical and theoretical issues. In similar fashion to the Argument from Conciliationism, the empirical issues stem from our lack of evidence that the sort of disagreement needed for the RAD to go through actually obtains. We saw that there are various reasons to doubt that even the best empirical evidence in support of the RAD is anywhere near enough for it to be plausible to believe that the argument goes through. The theoretical issues stem from the lack of resources available to the RAD to fend off the best challenge robust realist’s can level at it while remaining an independent skeptical argument. In particular, the RAD needs help from genealogical debunking arguments to motivate its key premises in the face of the best challenge to them robust realists are capable of mounting. And as a result of it being dependent in that way on genealogical debunking arguments, the RAD effectively reduces to those arguments.

\textsuperscript{77} Might the sort of reduction argument I’ve made against the RAD apply also to the Argument from Conciliationism? I’m not sure. Genealogical considerations certainly seem to me to be ones that can affect peerhood judgments insofar as they provide evidence of reliability. But how genealogical considerations might affect whether or not an agent should suspend judgment in the face of disagreement with someone they have good reason to believe is their peer about the sort of thing under dispute is something I’m not sure about.
In the next chapter, then, we shall turn our attention to genealogical debunking arguments themselves. We shall see what robust realists can do, if anything, to meet the skeptical challenge raised by those arguments.
Chapter 4, Genealogical Debunking Arguments

Introduction

I argued in the previous chapter that at a crucial point, the RAD’s reveals a dependence on Genealogical Debunking Arguments such that it effectively reduces to Genealogical Debunking Arguments. Our focus in this chapter, then, will shift to Genealogical Debunking Arguments themselves.

Recall that robust realism is committed to the following metaphysical claims: There are moral facts, all of which are determined by stance-independent moral standards; moral facts are a kind of normative fact, and the moral properties countenanced by moral facts are irreducibly normative; and irreducible normative properties are not reducible to natural properties because all natural properties are non-normative properties. This last commitment to the irreducibility of normative properties amounts to the commitment that moral facts are abstract, non-natural entities in the sense of being non-spatiotemporally located and causally impotent. Robust realism, as I have construed it in this thesis, is also committed to claiming both that some of our moral beliefs amount to knowledge, and that sometimes our moral beliefs are epistemically justified.

Many believe that that combination of commitments renders robust realism vulnerable to the “Cosmic Coincidence Objection.” This objection claims that if moral facts must be robust realistic, then our moral-belief forming methods can do no more than lead us to accidentally form

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78 Much of the content of this chapter comes from Pho (Forthcoming).
79 Things that are stance-independent are things that do not ultimately depend on the attitudes taken toward them by any agent (actual or hypothetical) for their existence. I owe this definition to Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 15).
80 Not every defender of a form of moral non-naturalism accepts the view that moral facts are causally impotent (see, e.g., Cuneo (2006) and Temkin (2017)). For my purposes here, I assume that robust realism accepts this view.
81 Hereafter for the sake of brevity I drop talk of properties and attribute causal impotency to facts, leaving it implied that causally impotent facts are those which countenance causally impotent properties.
82 I borrow the phrase “Cosmic Coincidence” from Matthew Bedke (2009, 2014).
true moral beliefs in a way that results in the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs being *undercut*.

Following those who raise this objection, we can call beliefs that are not accidentally true in a way that undercuts their epistemic justification beliefs which “track.” Since it is uncontroversial that an agent can achieve knowledge of the facts of a particular domain only if she is able to form beliefs that track the facts of that domain, the objection claims that the following inclusive disjunction is true: either we have no moral knowledge, or there are no robust realistic moral facts. Thus, robust realism is false either because (given the stipulation that the view is committed to our having moral knowledge) we do not have moral knowledge even if robust realism’s metaphysical claims are true (i.e., to use the terminology from the previous chapters, radical moral skepticism is true), or because robust realism’s metaphysical claims are false.

Genealogical Debunking Arguments (hereafter GDAs) have been taken to be one of the arguments that raises the Cosmic Coincidence Objection. The other argument which does so is what I will call the “Argument from Causal Impotence.” GDAs are empirically grounded arguments which argue that if robust realism is true, then the facts about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs “debunks” them by showing that they do not track robust realistic moral facts (even if there are any). In contrast, the Argument from Causal Impotence raises an *a priori* challenge: it argues that, *in principle*, it is not possible that beings like us could form moral beliefs that track robust realistic moral facts. For, *in principle*, it is not possible that beings like us could have *non-causal methods of epistemic access* to robust realistic moral facts, and one can track such facts if and only if one has that sort of epistemic access to them. It is claimed that these two

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83 I understand *undercutting* defeaters to be weaker than its *rebutting* defeaters: the latter shows that a belief is false, whereas the former shows just that the belief is epistemically unjustified.

84 Non-causal methods of epistemic access are methods that allow one to gain knowledge of a fact without either having personally causally interacted with it, or having been (or presently being) in the appropriate sort of relationship to the things which have causally interacted with it.
arguments raise separate challenges to robust realism because while the Argument from Causal Impotence relies on highly contentious *a priori* views about the possibility of beings like us acquiring knowledge of causally impotent facts, GDAs do not.\(^85\)

My aim is to show that GDAs “reduce” to the Argument from Causal Impotence, and so robust realists need only deal with the latter argument in order to fend off the Cosmic Coincidence Objection.\(^86\) The reason that GDAs so reduce, I argue, is that unless it is shown that it is not possible *in principle* for us to have a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts, it cannot be shown that the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs undercuts their epistemic justification. For unless it is shown that it is not possible *in principle* for us to have a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts, it cannot be shown that debunking explanations advanced by GDAs are superior to what I call “defusing explanations”: explanations which purport to show that the best data on the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs is consistent with our having a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts, and thus an ability to track those facts (thus “defusing” the threat of GDAs).

As is the case for the arguments I’ve made in the previous chapters, the success of the arguments I make in this chapter would not by themselves vindicate robust realism, but it would have significant implications for philosophical methodology. For my thesis implies that the research program of GDA proponents, namely, searching for an argument against robust realism that is grounded in the empirical data on the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs, rests on a

\(^85\) Daniel Crow (2015, p. 381), for example, explicitly takes this view. See also Street (2016, pp. 323-325).

\(^86\) The only philosopher that I know of who has argued for a similar thesis is Michael Klenk (2017). (Ramon Das (2016) perhaps also defended something similar in arguing that GDAs aimed at *moral naturalism* collapse into Harman’s explanatory challenge discussed in Harman (1977)). However, Klenk does not discuss what I call “defusing” explanations, and I think this is a mistake. For it is because defusing explanations can be put forth that GDAs ultimately reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence. David Enoch (2011, pp. 163-165) and Justin Clarke-Doane (2017, p. 18) seem to assume that something like my thesis is true, although their ways of addressing GDAs seems to show that they do not believe it has the same ramifications I believe it has.
mistaken view about the skeptical implications that can be drawn from that data without the help of contentious a priori considerations. And if the arguments I made in the previous chapter for the view that the RAD reduces to GDAs are successful, then my thesis in this chapter also implies that skeptical implications cannot be drawn from empirical data on moral disagreements without the help of contentious a priori considerations as well.

In what follows, this is how I will proceed. In §1, I present the Argument from Causal Impotence. In §2, I present a GDA. In §3, I begin the process of showing how GDAs reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence by canvassing one defusing response to GDAs: “byproduct” explanations of our capacity for moral knowledge. In §4, I present more precisely my argument for why GDAs aimed at robust realism reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence in light of byproduct explanations. I also respond to several objections to my argument. Finally, in §5, I conclude with some thoughts about where the soundness of my argument would leave the debate over GDAs.

1. The Argument from Causal Impotence

Strictly speaking, the Argument from Causal Impotence is not a domain specific challenge to robust realism. Modeled on the Benacerraf-Field challenge to mathematical Platonism, it presents a challenge to any view which posits stance-independent, causally impotent facts.\(^\text{87}\) Aimed at robust realism, it runs as follows:

(C1) In order for us to have knowledge of the facts posited by a metaphysical thesis \(T\), we must be able to track the facts \(T\) posits.

(C2) If a metaphysical thesis \(T\) posits facts that are constitutively stance-independent and that are causally impotent, then in order for us to be able to track the facts \(T\) posits, we must have a non-causal method of epistemic access to the facts \(T\) posits.

\(^{87}\) The Benacerraf-Field Challenge was originally developed in Benacerraf (1973) and Field (1989).
(C3) Robust realism’s metaphysical theses posit facts that obtain stance-independently and that are causally impotent.

(C4) Therefore, in order for us to be able to track the facts robust realism posits, we must have a non-causal method of epistemic access to those facts (From C2, and C3).

(C5) *In principle*, it is not possible for us to have a non-causal method of epistemic access to the facts robust realism posits.

(C6) Therefore, assuming that if moral facts exist they must take on the features robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they have, we have no moral knowledge. (From C1, C4, and C5).

(C7) Therefore, robust realism is false because either we have no moral knowledge even if robust realistic moral facts exist, or there are no robust realistic moral facts, where this disjunction is inclusive. (Corollary of C6: Cosmic Coincidence Objection).

(C1), I assume, is uncontroversial. (C2) is plausible since we could not have epistemic access to such facts through causal interactions with them. (C3) is true by definition, and (C4) follows from (C2) and (C3). (C5) is thus the premise usually under contention in this sort of argument.

For the purposes of the argument I am advancing in this paper, the important thing to take note of is that (C5) is not motivated by any claims about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs. Rather, the claim is that we *in principle* could not have a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. How is this in principle claim best cashed out? Answers to this question are bound to be controversial. Since I am not interested in whether the argument

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88 By “epistemic access,” I do not assume that robust realism is committed to epistemic internalism. I mean by the phrase merely a capacity which enables the formation of beliefs which do not invariably suffer epistemic defeat.

89 For example, one can understand the in principle claim as stemming from the truth of a causal theory of knowledge, as Benacerraf (1973) does in his argument against mathematical Platonism, but many find such a theories problematic. Alternatively, one can understand it as stemming from the claim that we cannot plausibly explain how our beliefs regarding causally impotent facts are *reliable*, and that our inability to explain our beliefs regarding such facts are reliable shows that we are not able to track them in the way needed for knowledge of them, as Field (1989) does in his development of Benacerraf’s argument. But, as Justin Clarke-Doane (2017) explains, it is difficult to ascertain a sense of “explain the reliability” which makes it plausible to claim both that we cannot explain the reliability of our moral beliefs (assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist), and our inability to explain their reliability undercuts their epistemic credentials. Lutz (Draft) has also argued that Field’s Reliability Challenge either fails to be an epistemological challenge at all, or collapses into Benacerraf’s original challenge (though he believes the challenge is not the worse for it).
succeeds, however, I need not defend a particular answer. It is enough for my purposes to note that regardless of what the best formulation of the principle is, it will claim that non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts is, for some reason, impossible for us; and that a defense of the principle will proceed via an argument from elimination which advances *a priori* considerations against the candidate theories of how we have non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. Since the candidate theories are actually quite disparate, this requires appealing to a variety of different *a priori* considerations to show their inadequacies. The range of theories on offer include, for example, John Bengson’s naïve realist theory of intuitions with abstracta as their contents, Michael Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism, Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau’s theory of “moral fixed points” which are conceptual truths knowable *a priori* by anyone who understands them, and Jacob Sparks’ theory of how non-moral beliefs about facts that we have causal epistemic access to can non-deductively inferentially justify moral beliefs.  

Proponents of the Argument from Causal Impotence attempt to show that each of these theories either fail in their own terms to adequately explain how we can distinguish beliefs that successfully track robust realistic moral facts from those that do not (in the case of Bengson’s and Huemer’s theories), or fail to respect the Open Question Argument (in the case of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s theory), or fail to cross the Is/Ought Gap (in the case of Sparks’ theory).

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90 See Bengson (2015a), Huemer (2005, Ch. 5; 2007), Cueno and Shafer-Landau (2014), and Sparks (Draft).
91 See Crow (2015, pp. 387-389) for criticism of Bengson’s view. For the latter two criticisms, see Lutz (Draft, pp. 26-27). See also Crow (2015, 385-387) for criticism of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s view on the grounds that they fail to explain how human knowers can transition from conceptual competency to knowledge that substantive facts obtain. Neither Crow nor Lutz actually directly address Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism. However, Crow seemingly indirectly addresses it in claiming that Huemer’s evolutionary byproduct explanation of our ability to achieve moral knowledge is unsatisfactory because he fails to give an adequate account of how we can reason our way to knowledge of robust realistic moral facts. Interestingly, Crow seems not to recognize that his argumentative strategy exemplifies how GDAs rely on the Argument from Causal Impotence: he claims that Huemer’s robust realist friendly explanation of the data on the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs is implausible ultimately because we lack reason to think the best explanation of this data needs to countenance that we currently have a capacity to epistemically access robust realistic moral facts.
Again, the important thing to note is that the considerations employed by proponents of the Argument from Causal Impotence to show that we do not have non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts do not rely on claims about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs. Thus if GDAs rely on the Argument from Causal Impotence to reach GDAs’ intended skeptical conclusions, GDAs do not have the potential to provide us any reasons to be skeptical about our ability to know robust realistic moral facts over and above the reasons that can potentially be given to us by the Argument from Causal Impotence.

2. Genealogical Debunking Arguments

Let us, then, take a look at GDAs. The general structure of GDAs is to grant arguendo that our beliefs in robust realistic moral facts are prima facie justified, and then proceed to show that learning about the causal genealogy of these beliefs presents an undercutting defeater for this assumption. Recently, the most popular form of GDAs have been styled “evolutionary debunking arguments” because of their focus on the influence of causal forces that acted as evolutionary pressures on our moral belief-forming dispositions in particular.92 I will draw from the works of proponents of evolutionary debunking arguments in explicating GDAs, but since proponents of these admit that the focus on evolution is inessential to their argument,93 and it seems that GDAs are stronger if they appeal to all causal forces rather than just those that drive evolution, I will take myself to be at liberty to speak of causal forces in general.

In explicating GDAs, then, we can follow Sharon Street’s presentation of evolutionary debunking arguments as confronting robust realists with a skeptical dilemma. Street presents the

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93 See, for example, Street (2006, pp. 120, 155), Joyce (2016, p. 125), Lutz (2017, p. 19).
dilemma as arising from the recognition that causal forces, especially those which drive human evolution, have in some way influenced all of our “evaluative attitudes,” and that robust realists have only two possibilities for how they might conceive of this influence:

First Horn: The influence of causal forces on the content of our evaluative attitudes is systematically indifferent to the presence of robust realistic moral facts.

Second Horn: The influence of causal forces on the content of our evaluative attitudes systematically favors making them align with the robust realistic moral facts.

Street argues that while knowledge of the truth of the Second Horn would allow us to claim that our moral beliefs can track, the Second Horn is untenable. For evidence from evolutionary biology suggests that the causal forces which most influence our evaluative attitudes are those which act as selection pressures. Thus these causal forces favor our having moral beliefs for the fitness enhancing behaviors they encourage, not for their truth value. In addition, since we need not suppose the truth of fitness enhancing moral beliefs in order to explain why holding them is

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94 It is worth noting that in speaking of “the causal forces that drive human evolution,” I do not mean to saddle GDA proponents with a commitment to taking the causalists’ side in the debates between causalists and statisticalists over the nature of what is described by models of evolutionary processes (e.g. natural selection, genetic drift, migration etc.). I do, however, mean to assume that proponents of such arguments are committed to claiming that explanations of how particular organisms outperform other organisms in terms of evolutionary fitness will invoke causally potent facts, and so are committed to claiming that the individual events whose effects aggregate to bring about the various evolutionary processes are causal ones. But neither of these claims are controversial, nor are they the sort of claims that are under dispute between causalists and statisticalists (see Walsh et. al (2017, pp. 2-5)). In addition, textual evidence from the works of those like Street supports attributing to proponents of evolutionary debunking arguments in particular this pair of claims. For example, in explaining why “Darwinian selective pressures” don’t directly determine the contents of our evaluative judgments, Street (2006, p. 120) claims that “other causal forces” also play a role in determining the contents of our evaluative judgments. She thereby implies that she takes the facts that explain why particular organisms are more fit than others, and so the facts that ultimately bring about the processes of evolution, are causally potent. I thus shall also attribute commitment to the causal potency of these facts to proponents of GDAs more broadly. Thanks to the Areté editors for pressing me to include this note.  

95 Selim Berker (2014, pp. 225) notes that proponents of evolutionary GDAs seem to be begging the question in favor of an internalist view of moral motivation that many realists would object to in supposing that the holding of moral beliefs ensures motivation to act on those beliefs. I do not take up this line of criticism here.
fitness enhancing, we need not suppose that selection for fitness enhancing moral beliefs indirectly selects for having true moral beliefs.\(^96\)

Trouble looms on the First Horn for robust realists as well. For, Street argues, accepting the First Horn seems to require that we believe both that we are totally dependent on causal forces for guiding us to true beliefs about the moral facts \(and\) that we cannot trust causal forces to do this successfully.\(^97\) And the truth of both of these beliefs entails that our moral beliefs could not be more than accidentally true, and so do not track the moral facts.

We can see, then, that GDAs are committed to the following line of reasoning that concludes by confronting robust realists with a skeptical dilemma:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(G1)} & \text{ Causal forces have in some way influenced all of our moral beliefs.} \\
\text{(G2)} & \text{ If causal forces influenced all of our moral beliefs, then either the First Horn or the Second Horn is true.} \\
\text{(G3)} & \text{ Second Horn is untenable.} \\
\text{(G4)} & \text{ Therefore, the First Horn is true (from G1, G2, G3).} \\
\text{(G5)} & \text{ If the First Horn is true, then, assuming that if moral facts exist they must take on the features robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they have, our moral beliefs do not track.} \\
\text{(G6)} & \text{ Beliefs that do not track do not amount to knowledge.} \\
\text{(G7)} & \text{ Therefore, assuming that if moral facts exist they must take on the features robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they have, our true moral beliefs don’t amount to knowledge (from G4, G5, G6).} \\
\text{(G8)} & \text{ Therefore, robust realism is false because either we have no moral knowledge even if robust realistic moral facts exist, or there are no robust realistic moral facts, where this disjunction is inclusive. (Corollary of G7: Cosmic Coincidence Objection).}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^96\) See Street (2006, pp. 125-135) for why she thinks what she calls a “tracking account” hypothesis of the influence of causal forces on our evaluative attitudes is less parsimonious, clear, and explanatorily fruitful than its non-tracking rival, which Street calls the “adaptive link account.”

\(^97\) Street (Street 2006, pp. 124-125)
3. Byproduct Explanations of our Capacity for Moral Knowledge

Since most robust realists accept (G1)-(G4) and (G6), (G5) is the premise they have challenged the most. One popular way they have challenged (G5) has been to concede that the First Horn entails that we cannot rely on causal forces to guide us to true moral beliefs, but then offer an explanation of how causal forces have played out such that humans have a capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. Such an explanation would show why even if causal forces do not ensure that our moral beliefs track robust realistic moral facts, our moral beliefs still could track those facts. I shall call such explanations “defusing” since they “defuse” the skeptical implications of the First Horn. One type of defusing explanation are byproduct explanations of our capacity for moral knowledge.\(^98\)

Taking their point of departure to be the evolutionary origins of our moral beliefs, as focused on by evolutionary GDAs, the idea behind byproduct explanations is that some capacity \(X\), although not selected for by causal forces for its fitness enhancing qualities, can be shown to obtain by showing that it is a byproduct of our having a more fundamental capacity \(Y\) which was originally selected for. To illustrate, Michael Huemer gives the example of our capacity to play chess. Though it is implausible that this specific capacity was selected for, it can plausibly be seen as somehow the byproduct of a capacity for intelligence which was likely selected for.\(^99\)

Assuming that GDA proponents employ the most plausible empirical data on the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs, byproduct explanations will show how a capacity that is

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countenanced by that data as something that was selected for by causal forces is the fundamental capacity out of which a byproduct capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts developed. In accord with the views of non-causal epistemic access mentioned earlier in §2, robust realists have a variety of choices for what they can claim this fundamental capacity is. For example, they can claim that it is a capacity to non-inferentially intuit abstracta, or understand conceptual truths, or competently follow inference rules to reach justified beliefs non-deductively, or a combination of all three, where the facts that these capacities originally enabled knowledge of were non-moral causally impotent facts. Such facts include putatively causally impotent facts such as basic logical, mathematical, modal, and normative facts. Why might a capacity for knowledge of such facts have been selected for, and why might it have enabled knowledge of each of these sorts of facts? Perhaps because knowledge of these facts helped our ancestors better process and transmit information in increasingly cognitively demanding social environments, and knowledge about each of these sorts of facts is arrived at via the same sort of reasoning abilities.\(^1\)

Given the development of traditions of inquiry into these sorts of facts, then, it is not surprising that we could refine the cognitive capacities that enabled rudimentary mathematical and modal knowledge in order to track facts about calculus and the reasons why water is necessarily $H_2O$ (and other cognate facts) despite it being implausible that causal forces favor our having true beliefs about these things. Similarly, it is not surprising that we could refine these same capacities as they are used to track normative facts in order to achieve knowledge that the wrongness of stoning rape victims (and other moral facts) is stance-independent despite the fact that it is implausible that causal forces favor our having this true belief, assuming that if moral facts exist

\(^1\) See Deem (2016, pp. 736-740) for a more thorough elaboration of this view. See also Schechter (2014) for why grasping logical (and associated modal) facts plausibly would have been fitness enhancing. Some debunkers, like Joyce (2006, p. 182) claim that knowledge of simple mathematical facts would have been fitness enhancing.
they must take on the features robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they have.\textsuperscript{101} Thus byproduct explanations claim that (G5) is false because while the First Horn requires admitting that it is plausible (even likely) that a significant part of human moral reasoning is problematically influenced by moral-truth-indifferent factors, it does not rule out our having a capacity to track moral facts that is a byproduct of our capacity to gain non-causal epistemic access to other sorts of causally impotent facts.

4. Why GDAs Fail to be Independent from the Argument from Causal Impotence

GDA proponents will of course object, as they should, that no byproduct explanation, or defusing explanation of any sort, would be satisfactory without a plausible account of the capacity of extant humans to non-causally epistemically access robust realistic moral facts. For without this account, we would have no reason to believe that we have a capacity for moral knowledge which such explanations might help explain. However, what is overlooked by GDA proponents is that a similar objection can be leveled at GDAs. For, because byproduct explanations that are consistent with any piece of empirical data of the sort appealed to by GDAs can be put forth, the only reason to concede that GDAs are sound is that we already have reason to believe that we could not possibly have non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. This is to say that unless we have good reason to accept:

\begin{equation}
(C5) \text{In principle, it is not possible for us to have a non-causal method of epistemic access to the facts robust realism posits.}
\end{equation}

we have no reason to accept

\begin{equation}
(G5) \text{If the First Horn is true, then, assuming that if moral facts exist they must take on the features robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they have, our moral beliefs do not track.}
\end{equation}

\textsuperscript{101} The water and stoning examples are from FitzPatrick (2014, p. 243; 2015, p. 889).
The argumentative impasse between debunking explanations and defusing explanations is thus this: proponents of both explanations claim that the opposing explanation is plausible only if the issue of whether a non-causal method of epistemic access is \textit{in principle} possible for us is settled in their favor. If proponents of defusing explanations are epistemically justified in holding their view such that this impasse cannot be broken in favor of GDAs without the success of the Argument from Causal Impotence, then, GDAs reduce to that argument because they offer no additional reason to be skeptical of robust realism. Thus the following argument confronts GDA proponents:

(R1) In order to pose an independent skeptical challenge to robust realism, GDAs must be able to show that our moral beliefs do not track robust realistic moral facts without support of other skeptical arguments.

(R2) Showing that our moral beliefs do not track robust realistic moral facts requires showing that we do not have a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts.\textsuperscript{102}

(R3) In light of defusing explanations (e.g. byproduct explanations), GDAs require the help of other skeptical arguments to show that we do not have a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts.

(R4) Therefore, GDAs cannot show that our moral beliefs do not track robust realistic moral facts without the support of other skeptical arguments (From R1, R2, and R3).

(R5) Therefore, GDAs do not pose an independent skeptical challenge to robust realism (From R1 and R4).

\textsuperscript{102} Readers might be curious about why I did not dedicate a subsection of §5 to addressing the possibility that (R2) might be false because it is enough for GDA proponents to show that no \textit{causal} method of epistemic access is available regarding robust realistic moral facts to defend their argument. I have not dedicated a subsection to addressing this particular possibility for two reasons. First, I take it that most readers will gather that the fact that one does not have causal epistemic access to a set of facts does not (at least clearly) logically entail that one does not have non-causal epistemic access to that set of facts. One thus will have to give an argument for why we should think that non-causal epistemic access to a set of facts is not possible (if only to show why it is not obviously the case that no causal epistemic access entails no non-causal epistemic access). And, this is second point, I take it that the fact that philosophers are concerned to defend things like the argument from causal impotence (or show why the Benacerraf-Field challenge can’t be met) or GDAs at all shows that philosophers are well aware that work needs to be done to undermine knowledge of causally impotent facts beyond just showing that causal epistemic access to them is impossible. Thanks to the Areté editors for pressing me to include this note.
I believe this argument is sound. In what follows, I defend (R3), its crucial premise, through an argument from elimination. The things to be eliminated are ways of motivating (G5) to allow GDAs to undermine robust realism by way of undermining byproduct explanations. I will argue that all of these ways fail to show that the success of (G5) does not rely on (C5).

4.1. GDAs and the Moral Lottery

Street argues that (G5) is motivated by the fact that the First Horn shows that our moral beliefs, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, are formed via a belief-forming method that is unreliable, and so are incapable of tracking. For, she argues, the First Horn forces robust realists into the desperate position of having to believe that, though there are countlessly many systems of evaluative beliefs causal forces could have “pushed” us to hold, they somehow pushed us to hold the one that most reliably aligns with the evaluative truths, and so we can form moral beliefs that track. And this belief is totally implausible because the First Horn renders our epistemic situation with respect to the robust realistic moral facts analogous to someone who entered the New York State Lottery and had no other reason to believe they had the winning ticket other than that they entered. Given the low probability of winning the lottery (assuming it is conducted fairly), one could not justifiably believe the winner was oneself under such circumstances. And, by analogy, if the circumstances described by the First Horn obtain, we could not justifiably believe that causal forces were such that we won the “moral lottery” in the sense that they made us morally reliable.\textsuperscript{103} Since, the thought goes, we ought to believe the analogy holds, and byproduct explanations suggest otherwise, they are implausible.

\textsuperscript{103} Street (2016, §12.9). See also Street (2006, p. 122).
Let us grant that a belief is capable of tracking only if it is formed via a reliable belief-forming method. Still, Street’s analogy requires that the First Horn guarantees that the method by which we form our moral beliefs is to depend on moral-truth-indifferent causal forces to guide us to them. For only then would they be unreliably formed. However, because byproduct explanations are consistent with the First Horn, robust realists can claim that we need not believe that the First Horn guarantees that we rely on moral-truth-indifferent causal forces to form our moral beliefs. They can claim that we ought to accept this belief only if the Argument from Causal Impotence succeeds because the First Horn leaves open the possibility that at least some of our moral beliefs were formed via a reliable belief-forming method that is enabled by a capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. In the terms of Street’s analogy, then, robust realists can claim that, if the Argument from Causal Impotence does not succeed in showing that we do not have a capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts that allows our moral beliefs to track them, we are epistemically justified in claiming that the byproduct explanation turns out to be true, and thus that we have indeed got the winning ticket in the “moral lottery.”

4.2. GDAs and Modal Security

In the course of defending his GDA, Michael Ruse writes:

[T]he objectivist [robust realist] must agree that his/her ultimate principles are (given Darwinism) redundant. You would believe what you do about right and wrong, irrespective of whether or not a ‘true’ right and wrong existed! The Darwinian claims that his/her theory gives an entire analysis of our moral sentiments. Nothing more is needed. Given two worlds, identical except that one

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104 One might also object to the probability judgment Street’s analogy invokes. For the use Bayes’ theorem to calculate the posterior probability that moral beliefs on robust realism are true requires establishing the prior probability of their truth prior to considering the GDA, and it seems GDA proponents have no method to assign a value to this prior. Kevin Brosnan (2011, pp. 54-56) raises this objection, but I do not take it up here.
has an objective [robust realistic] morality and the other does not, the humans therein would think and act in exactly the same ways.

Not long after this passage he writes, “had evolution taken us down another path, we might well think moral that which we now find horrific, and conversely. This is not a conclusion acceptable to the objectivist [robust realist].”\textsuperscript{105} Such passages in the works of GDA proponents have led some to think that (G5) is supposed to be motivated by the thought that all of our moral beliefs, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, are formed via belief-forming methods which produce beliefs that fail to satisfy either the sensitivity or safety condition on knowledge, and so fail to track.\textsuperscript{106} These two conditions countenance undercutting defeaters that arise from considering how beliefs fare under certain counterfactual scenarios. They can be understood according to the following schemas:

\begin{itemize}
  \item **Sensitivity:** $S$’s true belief that $p$ formed via belief-forming method $M$ amounts to knowledge if and only if in the nearest possible world in which not-$p$, $S$ would not form the belief that $p$ via method $M$.
  \item **Safety:** $S$’s true belief that $p$ formed via some belief-forming method $M$ amounts to knowledge if and only if in all (or nearly all) nearby possible worlds in which $S$ forms the belief that $p$ via method $M$, one’s belief that $p$ would be true.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{itemize}

It is plausible that GDA proponents mean to motivate (G5) in this way. For, in the first quoted passage by Ruse above, Ruse is clearly suggesting that, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs shows that they are insensitive because the way in which we form our moral beliefs is such that we would still hold

\textsuperscript{105} Both quotes can be found in Ruse (1998, 254). Passages expressing similar views can be also found in Joyce (2001, pp. 162-163), and Bedke (2009, p. 190; 2014, §4).

\textsuperscript{106} Clarke-Doane (2012; 2015; 2016; 2017) has advanced this reading of GDAs throughout multiple papers. Guy Kahane (2011, p. 111) also seems to think this is a plausible reading.

\textsuperscript{107} One need not formulate sensitivity and safety conditions on knowledge in modal terms, but since these conditions are often explicated in modal terms, and Ruse and other debunkers have often formulated their objections in modal terms, I will follow suit.
them even in possible worlds in which they are false. In the second passage, he suggests that our moral beliefs are *unsafe* if robust realism is true because, given the way we form our moral beliefs, had causal forces played out differently in nearby possible worlds, holding the moral facts constant across those worlds, we could easily have formed false moral beliefs in those nearby possible worlds. Since, GDA proponents claim, we have good reason to believe that the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs supports these conclusions, then, because byproduct explanations suggest otherwise, we have good reason to believe byproduct explanations are implausible.

It is worth noting that many have rejected sensitivity and safety conditions on knowledge.\textsuperscript{108} Let’s suppose, however, that they are legitimate. Here is why GDAs construed in Ruse’s way rely on what I have called here the Argument from Causal Impotence. Consider first sensitivity. Ruse assumes that, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, the First Horn guarantees that all of our moral beliefs are insensitive since it guarantees they are purely the products of moral-truth-indifferent causal forces such that they would be held even if false. But the causal data alone does not *guarantee* that this is the case, since byproduct explanations are consistent with the view that the causal forces that have influenced our moral beliefs are moral-truth-indifferent. Thus that data is consistent with the possibility that we form some of our true moral beliefs via a belief-forming method that produces “sensitive beliefs” that is enabled by a capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. And robust realists can claim that such moral beliefs, because of the method by which they were formed, would not be held in the nearest possible world where they are false. Thus robust realists can claim that unless the Argument from Causal Impotence has already successfully ruled out our having the capacity to form moral beliefs in this way, and thus ruled out the possibility that such a capacity arose as a

\textsuperscript{108} Many already reject sensitivity requirements (Ichikawa and Steup (2017, §5.1)). Bogardus (2016) rejects both.
byproduct of other ones, we need not concede that the First Horn shows that our moral beliefs are insensitive.

Consider now safety. Again, the First Horn threatens to show that, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, our moral beliefs are unsafe only if it guarantees that all of our moral beliefs are purely products of moral-truth-indifferent causal forces. For only if the First Horn did guarantee this were the case would it be plausible to claim that our moral beliefs would likely be false in nearby possible worlds wherein the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs played out differently and we still formed our moral beliefs via the belief-forming method we actually form them by. But, again, byproduct explanations show that the First Horn does not guarantee that our moral beliefs are formed via moral-truth-indifferent methods because they show that it does not necessarily follow from the fact that causal forces are moral-truth-indifferent that we do not form at least some of our moral beliefs via a belief-forming method which produces “safe beliefs” that is enabled by a capacity for non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. Thus unless the Argument from Causal Impotence ruled out our having such a capacity, we need not believe that the First Horn implies that our moral beliefs are unsafe.

Thus even granting sensitivity and safety conditions on knowledge, the only argument that gives us reason to doubt our moral beliefs satisfy them (granting that moral facts, if they exist, must be as robust realism’s metaphysical theses claim they are), and thus that byproduct explanations are plausible, is the Argument from Causal Impotence.

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109 Mogensen (2016b, 1804-1805) argues that the sort of counterfactual Ruse suggests threatens the safety of our moral beliefs, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, is metaphysically impossible because it violates origins essentialism. While I am mostly in agreement with Mogensen’s arguments, for my purposes here I ignore their implications.
Before concluding this section, it is worth noting that the arguments in this section also close off the possibility that GDAs, without the help of the Argument from Causal Impotence, might force robust realists to admit that, while our true moral beliefs are sensitive and safe, we have no idea which beliefs these are.\(^\text{110}\) For GDAs are unable to show that robust realists should believe that our moral beliefs are not formed via a belief-forming method that produces beliefs that fail to satisfy either sensitivity or safety conditions on knowledge without the help of the Argument from Causal Impotence. That being so, it would not be a stretch to claim that for any moral-belief-forming method that the Argument from Causal Impotence is unable to show is not sensitive or safe, GDAs could not undercut our epistemic justification for believing that the moral beliefs formed via those moral-belief-forming methods are true.

4.3. GDAs and Explanatory Superfluity

Some GDA proponents have argued that (G5) is best motivated by the claim that the First Horn implies that a complete causal genealogy can be given of any of our moral beliefs which does not suppose the truth of those beliefs, assuming that the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist. And such a causal genealogy, the thought goes, makes robust realistic moral facts superfluous for explaining why any of our moral beliefs are held. Consequently, it allows us to “explain away” the justificatory support of any evidence cited by robust realists to show that our moral beliefs track moral facts by explaining how the actual reasons for which we consider something to be evidence for our moral beliefs are guaranteed to have nothing to do with the truth-conduciveness of that evidence.\(^\text{111}\) To take just one example of how a causal genealogy of our moral beliefs might do this, consider that one might believe the “intuitiveness” of the belief that

\(^{110}\) This objection is in the spirit of the one Folke Tersman (2016) raises against Clark-Doane’s (2016) attempts to show that moral beliefs, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, are sensitive and safe.

\(^{111}\) Joyce (2006, Ch. 6; 2016), Fraser (2014, pp. 466-471), and Lutz (2017) have all taken GDAs down this route.
people ought not wantonly murder other people is evidence that confers justification on the belief. GDA proponents claim that the causal genealogy of this belief undercuts it because it would show how we were caused to believe that its intuitiveness increased the likelihood of its truth without at all countenancing the truth of the belief (e.g. perhaps those of our ancestors who found such a belief to be intuitive would have had better fitness regardless of the truth value of the belief). Since, GDA proponents claim, the First Horn implies, assuming the moral facts must be robust realistic if they exist, that the justificatory support of all of our moral beliefs is similarly undercut, and byproduct explanations imply otherwise, then, byproduct explanations are implausible for that reason.\footnote{It is worth noting that this way of defending GDAs risks self-defeat because the general principle of reasoning it relies on—i.e. take any belief to be unjustified which purports to represent facts that do not enter into the causal explanation of why the belief is held—presumably does not cause beliefs about itself, since general principles of reasoning are not concrete objects. I ignore this complication in this section, however.}

The problem with this way of motivating (G5) is that byproduct explanations are meant to be consistent with a complete causal explanation of our moral beliefs. What byproduct explanations reject is that a complete causal explanation of why we hold some of our true moral beliefs is a complete explanation \textit{tout court}: a complete explanation of why we hold those beliefs, they insist, includes the non-causal explanation of how we non-causally epistemically accessed the facts they represent. Robust realists, then, can insist that two problems confront GDAs if the Argument from Causal Impotence fails. First, GDA proponents would have to allow that some true moral beliefs are formed in an overdetermined way by both the influences of moral-truth-indifferent causal factors and by the employment of a non-causal method of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts. Since such complete explanations of why we hold those moral beliefs have to countenance the robust realistic moral facts they represent as part of the explanation of how we arrived at them via a non-causal method of epistemic access, the robust realistic moral
facts would not be explanatorily superfluous in such cases. Consequently, the justificatory force of evidence for our moral beliefs could not be “explained away” by showing that our reasons for citing that evidence are guaranteed to have nothing to do with their truth-conduciveness. Second, GDA proponents would have to allow that in some cases a non-causal explanation of why someone holds a true moral belief might be superior to a causal one. This would be true in cases where the best explanation of why a person holds a true moral belief is that they have employed a non-causal method of epistemic access such that they form their true moral belief by appropriately responding to the justifying grounds provided by the moral facts rather than that causal forces coincidentally pushed them to have that moral belief.

Unless the Argument from Causal Impotence has shown that we do not have non-causal epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts, then, we have no reason to doubt byproduct explanations because we have no reason to believe that the First Horn shows robust realistic moral facts to be explanatorily superfluous in a way that undercuts beliefs regarding them.

4.4. Nipping Byproduct Explanations at the Bud

In light of the preceding arguments, GDA proponents might be tempted to try and show that this more ambitious claim is true: the facts about the causal genealogy of all our beliefs undercuts the belief that we can track any sort of realistically construed causally impotent facts, or at least any realistically construed normative fact that provides categorical reasons. They could thereby “nip byproduct explanations at the bud” by undercutting our justification for believing we have a fundamental capacity for tracking non-moral causally impotent facts which byproduct explanations claim our capacity for moral knowledge is a byproduct of.

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113 Justin Morton (2016) thinks that undercutting belief in categorical reason giving facts is the way for debunkers to go.
It is worth noting that defending this more ambitious claim risks leading GDAs either into self-defeat, or into being unable to show why everyone ought to believe that robust realism is false on the basis of the facts about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs. To see why, note that GDA proponents presumably believe that the facts about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs provide us epistemic reasons\textsuperscript{114} to believe that byproduct explanations fail. For if they did not provide such reasons, they would not give us any reason to believe GDAs are sound. Facts about what epistemic reasons agents have, however, seem to be causally impotent. Moreover, as facts about what agents ought to believe, such facts clearly are a type of normative fact. Furthermore, GDA proponents presumably take our epistemic reasons to believe that byproduct explanations fail to have categorical normative import. For if the normative import of these epistemic reasons was not categorical, then at least some agents can be epistemically justified in believing that GDAs fail (even after coming to fully understand them and the evidence claimed to support it). To avoid self-defeat, then, GDA proponents must construe facts about epistemic reasons anti-realistically. By construing them anti-realistically, however, GDA proponents risk being unable to establish the categorical status of epistemic reasons for believing that byproduct explanations fail. For on a standard way of anti-realistically construing facts about an agent’s practical reasons, a particular agent’s practical reasons depends in some way on the contents of what Bernard Williams called the “subjective motivational set” of that agent—i.e. that agent’s “dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects,” as well as their desires and personal commitments generally.\textsuperscript{115} Since the contents of the subjective motivational set of

\textsuperscript{114} Facts provide agents with epistemic reasons for believing some proposition \( p \) when they make it the case that agents ought to believe that \( p \) is true (as opposed to, say, giving them reason to believe that \( p \) because belief in \( p \) would be useful for satisfying some practical goal). Such reasons contribute to an agent’s epistemic justification for holding a belief.

\textsuperscript{115} Williams (1980, p. 105).
different agents can vary significantly, it seems unlikely that an analogous anti-realistic construal of *epistemic reasons* will be able to accommodate the thought that facts about the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs provide *every* agent epistemic reasons to believe that defusing explanations fail—a sufficiently stubborn robust realist, for example, could anti-realistically generate for themselves an epistemic reason to doubt GDAs by maintaining some sort of standing desire for the failure of GDAs. So in opting for anti-realism about epistemic reasons to avoid self-defeat, it seems GDA proponents must sacrifice the ability of GDAs to establish that everyone ought to believe that byproduct explanations fail.

Let us assume, however, that these two worries can be mitigated. Still, a successful defense of the claim that the facts about the causal genealogy of all of our beliefs undercuts the belief that we can track any sort of realistically construed causally impotent fact, or at least any realistically construed normative fact that provides categorical reasons, requires a successful defense of a version of the Argument from Causal Impotence that is aimed at showing that it is not possible that we could track such facts *in principle*. To see why, first, note that even if the relevant empirical data showed that a capacity for tracking such facts was not selected for, it would not be a problem for robust realists to claim that our capacity to track such facts is itself an evolutionary byproduct of some more fundamental capacity that was selected for. For regardless of if this capacity arose as a byproduct of some more fundamental capacity or as something selected for, the causal story of how it arose would be the same: causal forces made certain behaviors fitness enhancing, and the cognitive processes that enable those behaviors gave rise to a capacity to track causally impotent facts (including normative facts that provide categorical reasons in particular). Consequently, robust realists who want to defend the view that such a capacity arose as an evolutionary byproduct can do so without having to reject any empirical fact about the causal
genealogy of all our beliefs marshaled in defense of GDAs. Robust realists can thus contend that we have no reason to think that those empirical facts give us reason to doubt that we possess the sort of capacity needed for byproduct explanations to succeed unless we already have reason to believe that we in principle could not have such a capacity. In other words, they can contend that unless we should believe that the version of the Argument from Causal Impotence aimed at showing that it is not possible that we have a capacity for tracking causally impotent facts in general, or normative facts that provide categorical reasons in particular, succeeds, then the empirical facts regarding the causal genealogy of all of our beliefs could not give us reason to doubt that we have such a capacity.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the GDAs do not pose an independent skeptical challenge to robust realism over and above the Argument from Causal Impotence because determining whether debunking explanations of the data on causal genealogy of our moral beliefs are superior to defusing explanations requires determining whether the Argument from Causal Impotence succeeds. To support my argument, in §4 I canvassed several ways GDAs might be motivated to undermine byproduct explanations, a kind of what I have called “defusing” explanations, without the support of the Argument from Causal Impotence ruling out the possibility of non-causal methods of epistemic access to robust realistic moral facts, and attempted to show that they all fail. If my arguments are sound, then it turns out there is only one argument that robust realists need to deal with to avoid the Cosmic Coincidence Objection. That argument is the Argument from Causal Impotence.

The truth of this conclusion would be a significant development for both robust realists and their opponents. For much time is spent by both parties debating whether the details of the causal
genealogy of our beliefs is compatible with our having moral knowledge if robust realism is true. If the conclusion I have reached is correct, however, then proponents of robust realism should realize that their efforts to respond to GDAs are better spent on developing positive accounts of how knowledge of robust realistic moral facts is even possible, since the best evidence (the only evidence that really makes a difference, in my view) for the view that the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs does not undercut them is the plausibility of such accounts. And opponents of robust realism should stop searching for arguments against robust realism which give a prominent role to empirical data on the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs, since such arguments obscure the fact that the epistemic significance of that data ultimately reduces to the epistemic significance of non-empirical considerations.\textsuperscript{116}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{116} In addition to my undergraduate thesis committee members, I also received helpful comments on the material that went into this chapter from David Mwakima, Jacob Zimbelman, and editors from \textit{Areté}, the undergraduate philosophy journal of Rutgers University.
1. Recap

In this thesis, I have defended robust realism from three different arguments that purport to raise epistemological worries about it. Two of these arguments are ones that appeal to considerations about moral disagreement, while the third appeals to considerations about the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs.

The first of the two arguments from disagreement that I considered was the Argument from Conciliationism. That argument’s aim is to establish that considerations about disagreement between moral peers gives us reason to doubt that we have any positive first-order moral knowledge. I argued that one problem for the Argument from Conciliationism is that it is implausible that we have good empirical grounds for believing that the sort of disagreement the argument believes spells trouble for robust realists actually obtains. And I argued that a second, more troubling problem for that argument is that it is implausible for pretty much any agent that she would be able to encounter moral peers disagreement with whom would rationally necessitate adopting radical moral skepticism. For pretty much any agent has what I called moral Deep Beliefs which are invulnerable to the skeptical threat posed by Conciliationism even if Conciliationism’s preferred method for identifying epistemic peers—i.e. the method which complies with the Independence principle—is the correct method for doing so.

The second argument I considered was the Reliability Argument from Disagreement (RAD). Rather than appeal to considerations about peer disagreement, the RAD appealed to considerations about disagreements that seem to suggest that our best method of moral inquiry is an unreliable as a method for achieving knowledge of robust realistically construed moral facts,
namely disagreements between moral agents who have achieved moral reflective equilibrium. I argued that, like the Argument from Conciliationism, the RAD is also beset by both empirical issues and theoretical issues. The empirical problem for the RAD is that even the best empirical evidence for the claim that the sort of widespread disagreement the RAD needs to obtain actually obtains or would obtain under more idealized condition does not provide much support for that claim. The theoretical issues for the RAD stem from its dependency on Genealogical Debunking Arguments (GDAs) to motivate their key premises, namely, that widespread moral disagreement between agents who have achieved reflective equilibrium is evidence of the unreliability of our best method of moral inquiry, and that we have no way of telling who has done a better job of applying our best method of moral inquiry than others. That it is so dependent ultimately results in the RAD reducing to GDAs.

After taking a look at the RAD, then, GDAs themselves became the center of attention. GDAs aim to establish that the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs, insofar as the moral facts are conceived of robust realistically, renders them epistemically suspect. I argued that the problem for GDAs is that we do not have good reason to believe that the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs could give us good reason to believe that they are epistemically suspect unless we have good reason already to believe that what I called the Argument from Causal Impotence succeeds, and so GDAs reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence. The Argument from Causal Impotence attempts to establish that we have good a priori reasons for doubting that beings like us could achieve knowledge of the sort of causally impotent facts posited by robust realism via some method of non-causal epistemic access. Since the Argument from Causal Impotence does not appeal to considerations about the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs, however, it turns out that the empirical considerations adduced by GDAs do not give us independent reason to have
2. Takeaway and a Suggestion for Future Research

The results of the previous chapters together suggest that the empirical considerations regarding moral disagreement and the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs do not give us much, if any, independent reason to have epistemic worries about robust realism over and above worries stemming from *a priori* concerns about the possibility of formulating a plausible account of how knowledge of the sort of causally impotent facts robust realism posits at all. For those results together suggest the following line of reasoning: While the principle of Conciliationism might give robust realists some reason to suspend judgment about some of our moral beliefs, it has pretty much no shot at giving them reason to suspend judgment about *all* of their moral beliefs because it is implausible that any peer disagreements could rationally necessitate such a radically skeptical outcome. Thus one who is seeking a disagreement-based challenge that might saddle robust realists with having to admit that their preferred conception of the metaphysics of moral facts is not compatible with us having any moral knowledge will need to turn to the RAD. But the RAD reduces to GDAs. And GDAs reduce to the Argument from Causal Impotence, an argument which does not appeal to empirical considerations about moral disagreement or the causal genealogy of our moral beliefs, but rather *a priori* considerations about the possibility of beings like us achieving knowledge of the sorts of causally impotent facts robust realism posits.

All of that suggests that what robust realists should focus on in future research to stave off epistemological concerns about their view is developing plausible positive accounts of how beings like us might have non-causal epistemic access to the sorts of facts posited by robust realism. For robust realists ultimately need to develop such accounts in order to allay the *a priori* worries raised by arguments like the Argument from Causal Impotence.
by the Argument from Causal Impotence about the very possibility of beings like us achieving knowledge of the facts posited by robust realism. And if the claims I have made about how the various arguments appealing to considerations about moral disagreement and the causal genealogies of our moral beliefs I have considered reduce are correct, then allaying those \textit{a priori} worries will also allay whatever worries are posed by those arguments appealing to those empirical considerations.

Of course, epistemological concerns aren’t the only ones confronting robust realism: there are also concerns about whether robust realism can plausibly account for moral motivation, the supervenience of moral facts, and for the apparent normative import of moral facts. And coming up with a plausible positive account of how we might achieve knowledge of the facts robust realism posits is no easy task. While I am cautiously optimistic that those non-epistemological concerns for robust realism can successfully be addressed (indeed, perhaps have already been successfully addressed), and that a positive account of the epistemology of robust realistic moral facts will eventually be developed in comprehensive fashion, I do not attempt to develop such an account here. A full defense of robust realism requires doing both of those things; that is why this thesis is ultimately only a partial defense of robust realism. Perhaps those are projects I will take up in the future.
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