

Moral skepticism

Richard Joyce

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1. What is moral skepticism?

The moral skeptic denies (or at least refuses to affirm) that anyone has moral knowledge. Moral skepticism could, of course, fall out of a more ubiquitous skepticism according to which we lack knowledge in general, but as an interestingly distinct position it is the view that there is something problematic about moral knowledge in particular. If one assumes that for *S* to know that *p* is (at least) for *S* to (i) believe that *p* (ii) truly and (iii) with justification, then there are several different ways of being a moral skeptic.

1. *Noncognitivism*: the denial that moral judgments are beliefs.
2. *Error theory*: the acceptance that moral judgments are beliefs while denying that these beliefs are ever true.
3. *Justification skepticism*: the acceptance that moral judgments are beliefs while denying that we are ever justified in holding these beliefs.

If one takes moral realism to be the thesis that we sometimes succeed in making objectively true moral judgments, then the first two forms of moral skepticism count as moral anti-realist views.¹ However, moral skepticism and moral realism are neither contraries nor contradictories. First, consider the constructivist view that we sometimes succeed in making moral judgments that are true but lack any robust claim to objectivity. Such a view leaves room for moral knowledge and yet remains (by the above criteria) a form of anti-realism. Second, consider the justification skepticism just described in 3. One might lack justification for holding moral beliefs that are in fact objectively true. Such a view satisfies the criteria both for moral realism and for moral skepticism.

To clarify moral skepticism further, let us consider an ancient distinction. The Academic skeptic assents that we lack knowledge and therefore suspends judgment on many matters, whereas the Pyrrhonian skeptic withholds assent even to the claim that we lack knowledge.² One might think that this distinction would “scale down” to the moral domain, perhaps matching some version of modern moral skepticism, but it

¹ If discourse about *X* consists of assertions that are sometimes true, then minimal realism is true of *X*. If, in addition, these assertions are true in virtue of the obtaining of objective facts, then robust realism is true of *X*. Some people doubt the distinction (Sayre-McCord 1986; Rosen 1994). Here I am privileging robust realism.

² The distinction as presented here is widely accepted though possibly not entirely accurate. For more subtle discussion of the relation between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism, see essays in Part I of this volume.

does so only clumsily. Let us define “moral knowledge” as knowledge of first-order moral claims, such as “Shoplifting is wrong,” “One ought not break promises without good reason,” and so forth. The natural thought would be that the Academic *moral* skeptic assents that we lack moral knowledge (and therefore suspends judgment on moral matters), whereas the Pyrrhonian moral skeptic withholds assent even to the claim that we lack moral knowledge. What is noteworthy is that the proposition that we have/lack moral knowledge is not itself a first-order moral claim (but is rather an epistemic claim about moral claims), and therefore such a Pyrrhonian moral skeptic must doubt something more than just first-order moral claims. In other words, one cannot be Pyrrhonian about *just* first-order moral claims. The classical Pyrrhonian skeptic poked fun at his Academic opponent for withholding assent to many claims while making a seemingly unaccountable exception for the universal epistemic claim that there is no knowledge. But the Pyrrhonian *moral* skeptic is robbed of this stratagem, for the Academic’s suspension of judgment for moral claims is perfectly compatible with the wholehearted assertion of the higher-order claim that there exists no moral knowledge.

While a modern skeptic may side with the Academic in affirming that we have no moral knowledge, she does not necessarily therefore suspend judgment on all first-order moral matters. The moral error theorist, for example, may base her confident denial of moral knowledge on her equally confident denial that any moral judgments are true. Faced with a moral proposition like “Shoplifting is morally wrong,” the error theorist does not suspend judgment, but affirms its falsity. (She also, of course, affirms the falsity of “Shoplifting is morally right” and “Shoplifting is morally permissible”—so her affirmation must not be taken to imply any kind of practical tolerance of shoplifting.)³

Nevertheless, something with the flavor of the Academic/Pyrrhonian distinction can exist at the level of moral skepticism, for one can either be confident that there is no moral knowledge or be quite undecided on the matter. One may, for example, be undecided whether moral judgments are beliefs or rather some kind of affective/conative mental state, in which case one will be undecided whether noncognitivism is true, and hence potentially undecided whether there is such a thing as moral knowledge. This is not, however, a terribly interesting kind of position to hold, since it may reflect a simple contingent and temporary ignorance on the subject. (I, for example, know nothing of advanced set theory, and therefore maintain a healthy but mundane skepticism on any controversial claim from that domain.) A more interesting kind of skepticism would hold that there is something *undecidable*

³ There are complications here concerning what counts as a “moral proposition.” If S claims to know that it is not the case that shoplifting is wrong, is this not a claim to *moral knowledge*, and therefore is it not incompatible with S’s claim that there is no such thing as moral knowledge? I do not think so. The error theorist can maintain that moral propositions are all and only those the assertion of which commits one to the existence of moral properties. “Shoplifting is morally wrong” is such a proposition, but “It is not the case that shoplifting is wrong” is not. (“Wilma is a witch” commits the speaker to the existence of witches; “It is not the case that Wilma is a witch” does not.) The error theorist can therefore confidently claim to know that it is not the case that shoplifting is wrong without contradicting the claim that there is no such thing as moral knowledge. See Pigden 2010 for useful discussion of the nuances of how the error theory should be described.

about these matters.⁴ While this latter view is coherent (and possibly plausible), modern metaethicists who hold a position implying the non-existence of moral knowledge have tended to be more assured in advocating their favored arguments, and therefore the three skeptical positions listed above are usually put forward with some confidence, meaning moral skepticism as it is discussed in the philosophical literature generally has a more Academic color. (In other words, Pyrrhonian skeptics would probably accuse modern moral skeptics of dogmatism.) In any case, let us discuss the three metaethical versions of modern moral skepticism in turn.

2. Noncognitivism

Noncognitivism has its roots in the nineteenth century, and arguably goes back to Hume,⁵ but it first crystallized in the 1930s in works by Rudolf Carnap (1935), A. J. Ayer (1936), and C. L. Stevenson (1937).⁶ The noncognitivist claims that moral utterances are not really assertions, despite appearances to the contrary. Noncognitivism can be put forward as a semantic thesis—that the meaning of moral sentences cannot be properly rendered in the indicative mood—or put forward as a thesis concerning the pragmatics of moral language—that moral sentences are not used with assertoric force. According to the former understanding, moral sentences, such as “Shoplifting is wrong,” need to be transcribed into some other non-indicative format, such as “Don’t shoplift!” or “Boo to shoplifting!” What is metaethically important about these renderings is that (i) they are no longer truth-evaluable, (ii) reference to moral properties (e.g., wrongness) has disappeared, and (iii) they are no longer items of belief. These same features are claimed of moral discourse according to a pragmatic understanding of noncognitivism. Imagine that one were to utter the sentence “Shoplifting is wrong” as a line in a play. The *meaning* of the sentence would remain the same as ever—it would be a mistake to transcribe the sentence into some other format—yet the sentence would not be put forward as a truth (i.e., it would not be asserted), the speaker would not be committed to the existence of wrongness (any more than “Once upon a time there lived a dragon” commits the storyteller to the existence of dragons), and it would not be believed, either by utterer or by audience. The pragmatic noncognitivist claims all this for ordinary moral utterances. For our current purposes, the key noncognitive claim is that moral judgments are not items of belief, implying that there can be no such thing as moral propositional knowledge.

Noncognitivism faces many challenges. If moral sentences are not truth-evaluable, then it is difficult to make sense of their appearance in standard logically complex contexts, such as negations or conditionals (Geach 1965). We frequently form views about the world on the basis of our moral judgments, yet if moral judgments are essentially conative (as opposed to doxastic), then our doing so would appear to be

⁴ For views along these lines, see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006; Loeb 2008; Joyce 2012.

⁵ I myself doubt that Hume should count in any straightforward way as a noncognitivist. See Joyce (2010) for discussion.

⁶ See Satris (1987) for discussion of the 19th-century continental roots of noncognitivism.

nothing more than a form of wishful thinking (Dorr 2002). If there are no moral beliefs, then it appears that we should reject as false or incoherent claims like “John believes that Hitler was evil.” If moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of the speaker’s desires, then what practical authority could such judgments purport to have over others? Indeed, why would we engage in serious moral debate at all, if all we are doing is trying to express conflicting feelings?⁷

The noncognitivism of the mid-twentieth century tended to be unapologetic about these consequences, seemingly willing to bite the bullet that many aspects of everyday moral discourse are flawed and its speakers confused. Contemporary noncognitivism is more conciliatory, attempting to win the right for many of these seemingly cognitivist features for moral discourse. Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist program, in particular, aims to provide legitimacy for talk of moral truth, moral belief, moral properties, moral assertions, and moral knowledge, all within a noncognitivist framework (Blackburn 1993; 1998). Regarding moral knowledge, for example, Blackburn claims that we know things when our confidence will not be overturned. One’s disapproval of shoplifting, say, may not be as assured as one’s disapproval of punching babies—after all, one may be willing to accept the *possibility* that shoplifting may, by some unforeseen but reliable causal chain, result in overall economic benefit, in which case one may be willing to countenance the possibility of ceasing to disapprove of shoplifting. One is considerably less likely to countenance this possibility for punching babies. Thus, Blackburn maintains, one can claim to *know* that punching babies is wrong in a way that one does not claim to know that shoplifting is wrong—though both associated moral judgments are mere expressions of attitude rather than belief.

The potential instability of this quasi-realist program has been pointed out several times (Dreier 2004; Lewis 2005), inasmuch that if quasi-realism is successful it becomes difficult to differentiate the position from the cognitivist perspective from which it is supposedly distinct. Perhaps the problem here arises from shifting and imprecise characterizations of the term “noncognitivism.” If, for example, one defines “noncognitivism” as the view that moral judgments are not truth-evaluable, then obviously earning the right to the literal use of the full-blown truth predicate for moral judgments is precluded. It would seem Blackburn himself has a somewhat different understanding of the anti-realist stance for which he aims to earn the trappings of realist talk, and on at least one occasion he has expressed a lack of enthusiasm for “noncognitivism” as a label for his position; he tends to prefer the title “projectivism.”⁸ It is clear, though, that if his quasi-realist program earns for morality a claim to genuine knowledge, then the resulting position is no longer a skeptical one (a result Blackburn will welcome).

⁷ See Smith (2001) for discussion of some less conspicuous problems for noncognitivism.

⁸ Blackburn (1996) writes: “I for many years strenuously opposed the label ‘non-cognitivist’, and ... finding the label appropriate is a prime symptom of failing to stand by the advertised minimalism” (the minimalism referred to being a central plank of the quasi-realist program). For discussion of the relation between noncognitivism and projectivism, see Joyce (2009).

3. Error Theory

Error theoretic moral skepticism is the thesis that while our moral discourse does function assertorically (*contra* the noncognitivist's view), the world lacks the properties and relations that are necessary to render these assertions true. A good analogy is atheism: the atheist denies that when someone utters, say, "God loves us" the speaker is merely expressing his/her feelings; rather, religious speakers really are making assertions about the world. (Thus the atheist is a cognitivist about theistic discourse.) However (the atheist thinks), the world is not furnished with the items necessary to make "God loves us" true; religious discourse suffers from a massive and systematic error. Similarly, the moral error theorist thinks that, in order for our moral judgments to be true, the world would need to provide properties like goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, evil and virtue—which it simply does not. The error theorist doesn't merely think that the world lacks *objective* moral properties, but that it lacks *subjective* moral properties. (To press the analogy, the atheist doesn't merely hold that the gods fail to exist objectively, but that they fail to exist subjectively, too.)

The error theory was coined and clearly articulated by John Mackie in 1977, though one can find awareness of the viewpoint running back to the ancients. Even Brutus is reported to have died with the despairing words "Wretched virtue; although you were nothing but a name, I practiced you as something real!"⁹ Several centuries earlier, Anaxarchus espoused a moral view that has been interpreted as an error theory (Warren 2002: 81).¹⁰ Generally speaking, although this form of skepticism has had few staunch defenders, the fact that so much of moral philosophy can be interpreted as striving to refute the view suggests a perennial awareness of its possibility.

In order to approach the question of what considerations might lead one to endorse a moral error theory, it is useful to reflect on what considerations might lead one to endorse atheism. While a person might be persuaded by a careful philosophical argument, such as the argument from evil, more likely would be a general conviction that appeal to divine entities is explanatorily redundant, along with some vague evocation of a principle of parsimony. This might be coupled with a set of images about why religious belief emerged for sociological reasons, a component of which might be the notion that humans are prone to gullibility when it comes to theistic ideas. The atheist need not claim to have any demonstrative falsification of theism (though, again, might try to develop such an argument)—need not claim to *know* that there are no gods—but nevertheless thinks that, on balance, the evidence is in his favor sufficiently to support disbelief being accorded high credence.

The moral error theorist takes a similar view of moral discourse. Perhaps he reflects on the thousands of years of trying to make sense of moral facts and judges the enterprise to have been a spectacular failure. Nothing in the world seems to

⁹ Reported by both Plutarch and Dio Cassius, though apparently Brutus (if he said it at all) was paraphrasing something poetically attributed to Heracles. See Nauck (1889: 910).

¹⁰ Though Julia Annas (1986) sensibly cautions against reading modern moral skeptical concerns into ancient skeptical thinking.

require the existence of moral facts (he thinks), which, coupled with a more-or-less stringent and more-or-less precise principle of parsimony, counsels in favor of disbelief. Perhaps this pessimistic conclusion is bolstered by a set of images about why moral thinking might have evolved (at evolutionary, sociological, and psychological levels), a component of which is the notion that humans are particularly prone to this kind of gullibility.

The moral error theorist (like the atheist) faces challenges that may force more careful defense. It goes without saying that many will find it an appallingly counter-intuitive and pernicious position. On the basis of its counter-intuitiveness, opponents might employ an epistemological principle according to which any sufficiently implausible conclusion should be rejected in preference to overturning any less implausible premises. Thus, any argument to the conclusion “There is nothing morally wrong with punching babies” can be rejected out of hand, it will be claimed, perhaps even without one’s being able to pinpoint its fault, since we know that accepting the conclusion will require a greater violation of our intuitions than rejecting any philosophical premise that might appear to entail it (see Enoch 2011). The error theorist, though, is unlikely to accept this epistemological methodology, and in any case the principle arguably fails to count against a counter-intuitive skeptical thesis if the advocate of the thesis also has at her disposal a plausible hypothesis about why the skeptical thesis would seem counter-intuitive even though true (see Joyce forthcoming).

Other opponents will endeavor to provide a characterization of moral properties about which the error theorist will find it difficult to locate grounds for complaint. For the religion analog this is implausible. To the atheist someone may say “But God is just *love*, and you believe in love, don’t you?”—to which it is reasonable to reply adamantly that God is *not* love (not, at least, in a literal sense involving the “is” of identity). That the concept *God* essentially involves characteristics that the concept *love* does not is something one can pronounce as assuredly as that the concept *dog* involves characteristics that the concept *glove* does not. The same sort of reply can be maintained by the moral error theorist but cannot be pressed with quite the analogous assurance. A hedonic utilitarian, for example, might say “But moral goodness just is happiness, and you believe in happiness, don’t you?”—to which the error theorist’s reply “No, moral goodness is *not* happiness” is a response that will require rather more deliberation and argument. In likelihood, what the error theorist will claim is that the concept *moral goodness* essentially involves reference to a certain kind of practical authority that the concept *happiness* does not (though it is open to the error theorist to highlight some other difference). Mackie, for example, refers to the work of rationalist Samuel Clarke, who in the early 18th century argued for (in Mackie’s words) “necessary relations of fitness between situations and actions, so that a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it” (1977: 40). Mackie cashes out this “intrinsic action-guiding” quality by saying that it would provide “reasons ... for doing or for not doing something [that] are independent of that agent’s desires or purposes” (Mackie 1982: 115). Such reasons, he thinks, can exist only in virtue of normative institutions, in the same way as one’s

reason to move a chess piece in a certain manner exists only in virtue of some human-decreed system of rules. But moral rules, according to Mackie, have their reason-giving quality objectively; we do not treat them as norms of our invention, for to do so would rob them of their practical authority, which is, arguably, their whole point.

The important elements of this argument are, first, that this “intrinsic-action-guiding” quality is (according to Mackie) something that moral goodness has *essentially* (such that any property lacking the quality simply wouldn’t upon reflection be recognizable as moral goodness), and, second, that it is a quality that happiness does not instantiate; therefore moral goodness cannot be happiness. Mackie goes further, of course, and claims that this quality is instantiated by no actual property; therefore the property of moral goodness is uninstantiated; therefore no claim of the form “X is morally good” is true.¹¹ (Whether this is taken to hold contingently or necessarily is an interesting distinction that I won’t investigate here, except to say that either will suffice for an error theory.)

The thorniest element of the argument is the conceptual claim that moral goodness has this intrinsic-action-guiding quality *essentially*. It is open to the error theorist’s opponent to acknowledge that many people have believed moral properties to have this kind of objective authority, while still maintaining that it is a dispensable component, conceptually speaking. Analogously, it was at one time almost universally believed that gorillas are violent brutes, but the discovery that the large primates living in Africa are in fact quite gentle and sociable creatures was not taken to be the discovery that gorillas do not exist. “Violent brutishness” was never an essential part of the concept *gorilla*. By contrast, the realization that nobody is or ever has been in cahoots with the devil *was* taken to imply that witches do not exist, since having supernatural powers is an indispensable trait of witches, conceptually speaking. So are moral concepts more like the concept *gorilla* or more like the concept *witch*? Not only has it proven hard to say, it has proven hard to decide upon a framework with which to address the question.

4. Justification Skepticism

Let us now turn to the third form of modern moral skepticism, the thesis that moral judgments are not justified. It is important first of all to establish that we mean *epistemic* justification. Suppose a person, S, holds the belief that *p* on the basis of good evidence, but would actually be better off, in terms of welfare (understood however you like), believing that *not-p*. Then we might say that S’s believing that *p* is instrumentally unjustified but, nevertheless, epistemically justified. Or suppose that S believes that *p* on the basis of some terribly flawed process of reasoning, but that having this belief is of great benefit to S. Then we might say that S’s believing that *p*

¹¹ Here I have limited attention to *moral goodness*, but of course the dialectic is supposed to generalize to any moral property. One might complain that Mackie’s references to the “intrinsic-action-guiding” quality of moral properties is more suitable to a discussion of *obligation* than *goodness*. This, I think, is a fairly superficial complaint, and the example could easily be altered to accommodate. See Joyce (2001: 175–177) for some pertinent discussion.

is epistemically unjustified but, nevertheless, instrumentally justified. Of course, precisely what it takes for a belief to be epistemically justified is a matter of great controversy. (Even my references to S's being sensitive to the evidence will not please everyone.)

Speaking generally, one person may be justified in believing that *p* while another person is not justified in believing that *p*. Someone may lack justification for her belief but at a later date gain justification, or have justification but at a later date lose it. Nobody, I suppose, will object to the claim that some people sometimes lack justification for some of their moral beliefs (assuming that moral judgments are beliefs). Probably few will deny the somewhat bolder claim that everyone sometimes lacks justification for some of their moral beliefs. Maybe we'll be willing to accept that there are some people who lack justification for all their moral beliefs. But the interesting skeptical thesis is stronger than any of these: that we all lack justification for all of our moral beliefs. And one can go stronger still, by maintaining that this epistemically disheartening situation is permanent, that there is nothing any of us can do to acquire justification for our moral beliefs. Call the penultimate thesis "justification skepticism" and the final thesis "strong justification skepticism." Both views appear to prescribe a suspension of judgment upon learning that one's moral beliefs lack justification. In what follows, I will confine attention to two arguments that might lead one to endorse justification skepticism, keeping an eye on whether the arguments also support strong justification skepticism.

Let us begin by considering a person ordinarily lacking justification for one of her everyday moral convictions. What might lead us to endorse this description of her epistemic state? Perhaps we think that she hasn't really considered this moral matter in any depth but is simply voicing an opinion that she was brought up with or that her peers all hold. Perhaps we think that she is biased or emotionally invested in the matter in a way that distorts her judgment. (Witness the eagerness manifested in people to punish someone when a deeply upsetting crime has been committed.) Perhaps we are aware that other parties, who are no worse off in terms of access to information or the capacity to deliberate, have come to a completely different moral conclusion. In everyday contexts, any combination of these findings might lead us to the conclusion that an individual's moral conviction lacks justification. The proponent of justification skepticism about morality maintains that, upon reflection, one or more of these features that we ordinarily think of as removing justification actually applies across the board, to everyone's moral beliefs at all times.

Focus, to begin with, on the case when a person's moral judgment is merely a matter of unreflectively voicing a view with which she was raised and by which she is surrounded. Some will claim that this is not sufficient for a lack of justification, since the moral view in question might nevertheless be an accurate one, picked up by the epistemic community via reliable truth-tracking mechanisms and transmitted to the person via reliable causal means; the fact that the individual herself cannot articulate evidence for her moral view is neither here nor there. Our attention, then, should move from the individual to her epistemic community: how likely is it that the community is (or in the past *was*) reliably tracking moral facts?

At this point questions about the genealogy of moral thinking come to the fore—not just at the individual or sociological level but potentially from an evolutionary and biological perspective as well. In recent years, there has been much interest in hypotheses of moral nativism: the thesis that human moral thinking has evolved as a discrete psychological adaptation (see Krebs 2005; Joyce 2006; Mikhail 2011; Boehm 2012). What is noteworthy about these hypotheses is that they explain why moral thinking evolved in terms of its enhancing social cohesion among our ancestors—something that is no less plausible for an error theorist than a moral realist. In other words, moral nativism provides an explanation of why humans engage in moral judgment in a manner that does not imply or presuppose that the faculty in question was or is truth-tracking. (And, importantly, it is not a far-fetched-but-unfalsifiable skeptical hypothesis, like Descartes’s demon, but a perfectly respectable and plausible empirical theory.)

One might be tempted by an error-theoretic argument at this point: that because moral facts are not needed to explain anything, not even our making moral judgments, then one should, via a principle of parsimony, eliminate them from our ontology. But this is not the argument with which we are concerned here. Rather, the argument is that because our moral judgments can be explained without reference to moral facts—because they flow from a non-truth-tracking mechanism—we have reason to suspend judgment as to their truth. Whether the availability of moral nativist hypotheses undermines the epistemic status of moral judgments in this fashion is a matter of current debate (see Street 2006; White 2010; Brosnan 2011; Joyce 2013).

A second argument for justification skepticism focuses on moral disagreement—an argumentative schema familiar to classical skeptics. Agrippa’s first Mode (*diaphōnia*) states that we must suspend judgment when there is undecided conflict over a proposition, while several of Aenesidemus’s Ten Modes highlight conflicting judgments among parties as the basis of Pyrrhonism. Modern epistemology continues to struggle with the question: what impact should disagreement have on the epistemic status of our beliefs? According to what is called “the Equal Weight View,” one’s confidence that p should fade upon encountering a dissenting epistemic peer if one’s prior conditional credence that p is low, where “prior” means prior to thinking things through and knowing what one’s peers think about whether p , and “conditional” means conditional on what one has learned about the circumstances of disagreement (see Elga 2007; also Feldman & Warfield 2010; Machuca 2013). In the case of moral matters, disagreement is ubiquitous. Norm variation among cultures on topics like infanticide, cannibalism, incest, etc., are the most obvious and vivid examples to reach for; but one might instead simply advert to the small number of dedicated moral error theorists, who (when speaking carefully and sincerely) dissent to every moral claim to which anyone else wishes to assent. After all, the empirical prevalence of disagreement may not be an important factor; if it is merely possible that a rational agent with the same information as you, with the same facilities of discernment and deliberation as you, could come to believe that not- p , then this may be sufficient to undermine the epistemic status of your belief that p . If only actual peer disagreement were to count, then (as Markus Lammernanta notes (2011: 211)), one could render

one's beliefs justified by killing all actual dissenters. (See also Kelly 2005; for criticism, see Folke Tersman's contribution to Machuca 2013.)¹²

I will end by briefly drawing attention to three features of these arguments for justification skepticism.

First, they seem particular to the moral realm; they don't fall out of a more general epistemic skepticism. Even if human moral thinking is the output of a mechanism that is non-truth-tracking, evolutionarily speaking, this need not be true of other evolved psychological mechanisms. Many of the various faculties involved in perception, for example, have surely evolved to track aspects of the world. (There would, for instance, be no adaptive gain in seeing distant things as close, or *vice versa*.) Also, moral disagreement seems to be different from many other forms of disagreement. We will (arguably) countenance the possibility of two rational agents with the same information and the same powers of deliberation disagreeing over a moral matter in a way that we will not accept the possibility of their disagreeing over an empirical matter.

The second thing to note about justification skepticism is that in counseling suspension of judgment on moral matters it differs both from noncognitivist skepticism—which allows one to carry on confidently making moral judgments—and from error theoretic skepticism—which seems to require one to deny moral propositions. In this respect justification skepticism seems more akin to classical versions of skepticism.

The final observation is that neither of the arguments outlined—from genealogy and from disagreement—appears to contain the resources to establish *strong* justification skepticism. If they succeed at all, they succeed in removing any benefit-of-the-doubt that we might otherwise have been inclined to accord our moral judgments, but there doesn't appear to be anything in these arguments to exclude the possibility of justification being instated. Ancient skeptical arguments also suffered from this limitation. Perhaps the skeptical Modes succeeded in showing that our current beliefs lack justification, but the conclusion that this justification is *unattainable* was more a matter of the rhetoric of the skeptics' language than an established thesis. Philo, for example, in *On Drunkenness* talks of disagreement being "chronic and hopeless" (in the words of Annas 1998: 196), which does suggest that the skeptical plight is envisaged to be a permanent human fixture.¹³ The crucial phrase in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (book 1, part 15, and elsewhere) is translated variously as "unresolvable impasse" (Mates 1996) and "undecidable dissension" (Annas & Barnes 2000). But the problem is that neither Philo, Sextus, nor any other ancient philosopher possessed a solid argument to show that disagreement

¹² We must again distinguish this epistemological argument from a superficially similar argument for a moral error theory. Mackie claims that the best explanation of the phenomenon of widespread intractable moral disagreement is that there are no moral facts (1977: 36–38). The argument currently under discussion, by contrast, does not rely on inference to the best explanation, and does not conclude that there are no moral facts, merely that our beliefs about them lack justification.

¹³ The Philo mentioned here is Philo of Alexandria, not the earlier Academic skeptic Philo of Larissa. Still, in the passage cited Philo of Alexandria trenchantly builds a case against dogmatism, employing arguments that clearly draw on the Greek skeptical tradition.

must always have these qualities; they are just pessimistic. The ancients, of course, lacked an awareness of the impressive menu of epistemological theories now available—foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, and so forth—all of which hold out hope of demonstrating that many of our moral beliefs are justified.

Perhaps what these arguments for justification skepticism achieve is the overthrow of the force of epistemic conservatism regarding moral beliefs: the idea that some degree of warrant for moral beliefs comes from the mere fact that we already hold them. The arguments for justification skepticism would shift the burden of proof onto the shoulders of the non-skeptic, challenging her to articulate a sound and defensible account of moral justification. The skeptic may then proceed to reject these accounts as they are offered, thus showing that the initial skeptical challenge remains unanswered. Sextus shows awareness of this strategy, since not only does he use the Modes to throw down the skeptical gauntlet, so to speak, but then backs this up with arguments aimed at exposing the failings of every available positive theory.¹⁴ (An updated version of Sextus's *Against the Ethicists* might include "Against the Foundationalists," "Against the Coherentists," etc.) Such a strategy is by no means doomed to failure, but its advocate can never declare victory, since one never knows what vindicative epistemological theory the next generation might devise. The justification skeptic may have to rest content with the open-ended conclusion that until such a theory is enunciated and persuasively defended, a suspension of judgment on moral matters is called for.¹⁵

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¹⁴ On Sextus's skepticism, see the essay on him in Part I of this volume. Cicero's *de Finibus* also contains arguments designed to refute each major moral theory in turn.

¹⁵ Many thanks to the editors of this volume for a lot of sensible advice.

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