Disagreement: Ethics and Elsewhere

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1. Introduction
Ethical (or moral) realism is, roughly, the thesis that moral issues allow for objectively correct answers. A classical argument against this position appeals to the fact that the answers people actually provide to such issues differ widely, both within and between cultures. In response to this argument, it has been held that it generalizes too easily. For example, it has been argued that an ethical anti-realist who relies on moral disagreement cannot retain a realist view about the empirical sciences, in view of the fact that they too are impregnated with controversy and debate. Anti-realists have in turn retorted that the similarities are superficial, and that the disagreements that arise in ethics differ crucially from those that occur in the sciences. It is in particular stressed that there are, normally, apt means for resolving scientific disputes while the prospects for a rational resolution of moral disagreements are often bleak.

There is a more recent version of the response, however, that is presently gaining in popularity. That version focuses on other philosophical areas rather than the sciences. One discourse that is especially thought to be pertinent is epistemology and judgments about what it is rational or reasonable to believe. Another is meta-ethics itself. After all, some of the disagreements that arise in those areas seem just as difficult to resolve as those that concern moral issues. The idea is therefore that if one adopts ethical anti-realism on the basis of the existing moral diversity then one is committed to being an anti-realist about meta-ethics and epistemology as well. It is this idea that provides the focus of my paper.

Those who favor the response in question think that the alleged fact that the argument from moral disagreement generalizes in the indicated way shows that there is something wrong with it and/or with an ethical anti-realist’s reliance on it. They reason roughly as follows. To be an anti-realist about an area is to deny that the claims made in that area can be (objectively) true. Thus, if an ethical anti-realist extends her anti-realism also to epistemological and meta-ethical claims, she is no longer in a position to say that her ethical anti-realism is (objectively) true or that it is (objectively) true that anyone has a reason to accept it. She is therefore left with a position that hardly even seems to be a position. Thus, if relying on moral disagreement commits an ethical anti-realist to being an anti-realist about meta-ethics and epistemology, she should seek another basis for it.

For example, suppose that the type of anti-realism favored by the argument from disagreement is some form of expressivism. According to expressivism, moral convictions lack truth-values and are expressions of emotions or some other type of conative attitude rather than beliefs. This is a thesis that is associated with, among others, Allan Gibbard. Gibbard’s views have recently been criticized by Derek Parfit. Parfit thinks that there is no room for a position that combines an expressivist view about moral judgments with a non-expressivist view about judgments about what is rational, and applauds the fact that Gibbard seems to agree, in that Gibbard writes that ‘to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact’. However, Parfit also thinks that this (alleged) fact threatens the coherence of Gibbard’s position. For, he thinks, ‘[i]f there could not be truths about what it is rational to believe, as Gibbard’s view implies, it could not be rational to believe anything, including Gibbard’s view.’ Parfit does, wisely, not take the (alleged) fact that Gibbard’s position has this implication to refute it. After all, the claim that it is not rational to believe in a position does not in turn entail that it is false. But he insists that it means that the costs of adopting expressivism are ‘very high’.

Parfit’s reasoning could be questioned. For example, he clearly makes an illegitimate move when deriving the normative conclusion that it is not rational to accept moral expressivism from the meta-normative claim that ‘to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact’. Expressivism is, when applied to epistemic judgments, a theory about what it

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is to think that it is rational to have a belief, not a theory about what is rational. So—it might be argued—it has no implications about the rationality of belief in anything.\textsuperscript{4}

However, I shall not continue this discussion about the potentially undermining implications of the claim that an ethical anti-realist, by relying on the argument from disagreement, is committed to being an anti-realist also about epistemology or meta-ethics.\textsuperscript{5} Instead, I shall explore its plausibility. Can an ethical anti-realist who relies on moral disagreement reasonably deny that the disagreement that occurs in meta-ethics or epistemology have similar implications about those discourses? That is the central question. I shall argue that the answer is yes.

The plan is as follows. In the next section, I make some preliminary remarks, for example concerning the content of realism and other meta-ethical positions. In section 3, I distinguish between two versions of the argument from disagreement: ‘The argument from inaccessibility’ and ‘the argument from ambiguity’. In section 4, I develop an argument to the effect that neither of those versions applies equally well to epistemology, on the ground that there are crucial differences between the types of disagreement that arise in those disciplines. In section 5, I argue that, even if there are no such differences, the argument from ambiguity still fails to apply in the epistemic case. In section 6, I turn to meta-ethics, and argue that the conclusions from the previous discussions hold there as well, which allows an ethical anti-realist who relies on disagreement to retain a realist view also about meta-ethical claims. In section 7, finally, some concluding remarks are made.

2. Some preliminaries
Nothing in my discussion is going to rest on any special or controversial views about the content of realism or its competitors. The task of defining these positions raises subtle questions, but most of them are irrelevant for my purposes.

Thus, I shall assume that realism states that the convictions or judgments on which it is applied have truth-values and consist in beliefs rather than, say, emotions or desires.\textsuperscript{6} It also

\textsuperscript{4} Admittedly, it does entail that the judgment that it is rational to accept expressivism is not true. But it also entails that it is not false.

\textsuperscript{5} I do that elsewhere. See my ‘The Case for a Mixed Verdict on Ethics and Epistemology’, \textit{Philosophical Topics}, forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{6} Notice that I define realism and its competitors in \textit{psychological} rather than \textit{semantical} terms. That is, I conceive of them as making claims about the nature of the commitments we use ethical terms and sentences to express rather than about those sentences themselves. It is to those commitments I refer with phrases such as ‘moral convictions’ and ‘moral judgments’. The indicated difference concerning how the pertinent positions are to be stated has no bearing on the arguments I shall pursue.
entails that there are facts in virtue of which those beliefs can be true; facts that exist independently of us in relevant ways. Thus, one can be an anti-realist either by denying the first component of realism or by denying the second. Expressivists take the first option, while ‘error-theorists’, such as John Mackie, take the second.

Realism is usually also supposed to include certain further claims, besides those already mentioned. For example, to exclude relativism, it is often assumed that realism entails that the property ascribed by judging something to be, say, morally right does not differ depending on the subject’s cultural belonging or background beliefs, etc. Moreover, realists believe not only that the target judgments can be true but ‘robustly’ or ‘realistically’ so. The latter type of qualification is often motivated by the fact that some who are taken to belong to the expressivist camp invoke a ‘minimalist’ view of truth. Such a view allegedly allows them to hold that moral convictions, or at least the sentences we use for expressing them, can, after all, be true, since, on that view, ascribing truth to a sentence is, roughly, just to affirm it. However, as I will not appeal to minimalism, I am going to ignore the complex issues about how to spell out the qualification ‘robustly’ in clearer terms. I am also going to ignore the discussion about the nature of the properties moral judgments are supposed to ascribe (whether they are natural or non-natural, etc), since that dispute is irrelevant to the arguments I am going to pursue as well.

There is an assumption that will play a role in the subsequent discussion, however. It concerns the scope of the claim that argument from disagreement tends to generalize. As I indicated in the introduction, the attempt to discredit the ethical anti-realists’ reliance on the argument from disagreement by arguing that it makes them committed to a more general form of anti-realism is not new. The best-known version of this challenge insists that such reliance cannot be combined with a realist view about the sciences. As I also indicated, ethical anti-realists typically respond to this challenge by stressing that although there is, at any given point, plenty of disagreement also in the sciences, these disagreements tend to be resolved over time. What this illustrates, they think, is that those disputes normally can be attributed to cognitive shortcomings of various kinds, whose influence and relevance can be established

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9 An example of such an expressivist is Simon Blackburn. The idea that moral judgments can be true (although they lack, he thinks, ‘genuine truth conditions’) is part of his ‘quasi-realism’. See, e.g., Spreading the Word, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 167.
independently, such as ignorance of relevant evidence, fallacious reasoning and so on. It is through liberating themselves from the influence of such factors—for example by gathering more and better data, or by finding ways of articulating the disputed theories in a way that allows for more rigorous testing—that scientists manage to resolve their disputes.

Much moral disagreement can also of course be attributed to factors that may plausibly be seen as cognitive shortcomings, including the ones that I just mentioned. But the idea is that although some moral disagreements can be handled in that way, many others can’t, as is illustrated by the disputes between philosophers like Rawls and Nozick and other philosophers (who are, presumably, freed of many of the pertinent shortcomings). The latter type of disagreement is rooted in more fundamental differences in moral outlook and would survive even if the parties were to gather more empirical evidence (since the parties disagree about its relevance), enhance their reasoning skills, reflect more deeply on each other’s arguments or rid themselves of unconscious biases. It is this fact that explains the striking absence of the type of convergence in ethics that we can observe in the sciences. And the idea is that, unlike disagreements that can be explained away with reference to cognitive shortcomings, such disputes do generate anti-realist conclusions.10

In what follows, I shall assume that this response is convincing.11 The reason is not that it can’t be questioned (it obviously can). The reason is rather that I want to explore the suggestion that the alleged fact that the ethical anti-realist’s argument from disagreement generalizes to meta-ethics and epistemology presents a distinctly new challenge that does not just reiterate the earlier concerns about the empirical sciences. In other words, I shall pursue the discussion under the assumption that an ethical anti-realist who relies on moral disagreement can consistently retain a realist view about certain non-philosophical areas, on the basis of a response along the lines just indicated.

3. Inaccessibility and ambiguity

The question I shall address can be stated as follows: Can one plausibly argue that the versions of the argument from disagreement that applies to meta-ethics and epistemology are less compelling than the ones that apply to ethics? I shall first consider the part of this question that concerns epistemology. I shall then (more briefly) turn to meta-ethics.

10 I shall subsequently reconstruct and discuss a way of supporting this idea.

11 Of course, I am not thereby assuming that the alleged convergence in science somehow guarantees that a realist view about that area is correct. It doesn’t, since there are possible explanations of it that does not support such a conclusion. There are all sorts of psychological mechanisms that can produce agreement, some of which produce agreement independently of the truth or epistemic status of the views in question.
Epistemologists make all sorts of different claims. The ones that are primarily supposed to be relevant in the present context are those that are associated with normative epistemology. Here are some examples:

- $a$ is (epistemically) justified in believing that $P$.
- $a$ has reasons to believe in $P$.
- It is rational to believe in $P$.
- There is strong or adequate evidence for/against $P$.
- The theory $T$ obtains more support from the evidence than its competitors.
- $T$ gives a better account of the evidence than $T^*$.

Some epistemic judgments are less easy to categorize in this respect, including statements to the effect that a proposition is probably or highly likely to be true. There are interpretations (such as the frequency interpretation) under which such statements come out as being straightforwardly non-normative. However, under other interpretations, they are commonly conceived as having a normative element, and I shall therefore include them among those that are relevant to the present investigation.

Whether the disagreement about (normative) epistemic judgments really is relevantly similar to that which exists in ethics presumably depends on why, more specifically, moral disagreement is supposed to generate anti-realist conclusions. There are many answers to that question; answers that represent distinct versions of the argument from disagreement. I am going to focus on two versions, namely what I shall call ‘the argument from inaccessibility’ and ‘the argument from ambiguity’. The point of departure of both of them is the claim mentioned earlier; i.e., the claim that even if many moral disagreements can be attributed to factors that may plausibly be seen as cognitive shortcomings, there are those that can’t. In what follows, I shall call disagreements of the pertinent type—disagreements that do not depend on ignorance of non-moral facts, bias, bad reasoning, lack of imagination and the like—‘radical’.

The existence of radical moral disagreement is commonly supposed to support ethical anti-realism due to the way it is to be explained. For example, David Brink takes the central premise of the argument from disagreement to be the claim that many moral disagreements

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12 See, e.g., Feldman, Richard, ‘Naturalized Epistemology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) for the view that there are interpretations of probability statements under which they are normative.
are ‘so pervasive and so intractable that the best explanation of this kind of disagreement is that there are no moral facts’.\(^{13}\) This suggestion might initially strike one as odd. What explains why people have different moral views is presumably that they have different upbringings, or belong to different social groups, or have inherited different personality traits, which is something anti-realists can concede (and often stress). And empirical facts of that kind seem, at least taken by themselves, entirely consistent with realism. However, there are ways of making sense of Brink’s suggestion.

Thus, it may be argued that the non-existence of moral facts helps to explain why many moral disagreements are so difficult to resolve because we can assume that if such facts were to exist, there would be less disagreements of that kind. One possible reason for accepting that assumption is the thesis that the facts in question, if they exist, are epistemologically accessible; i.e., such that it is possible to achieve knowledge of them, at least for a thinker who is suitably equipped from a cognitive point of view. Given the claim that they are thus accessible, then, if they exist, we have reason to expect some convergence on them, at least among people who \(\textit{are}\) suitably equipped. The absence of such convergence therefore indicates that they don’t exist. And the point is that the existence of radical moral disagreements shows that the pertinent type of convergence is absent.

One way for a realist to respond to this argument is to deny that the truths she posits are accessible in the relevant sense. For if moral facts are not thus accessible then their existence gives us no reason to expect any convergence, not even among competent cognizers. However, this is a move that is widely held to be desperately implausible.\(^{14}\) The argument is therefore sometimes construed as a \textit{reductio}. In response to the existence radical moral disagreement, realists must, it is held, assume that the truths she posits may, as Crispin Wright has put it, ‘transcend, even in principle, our abilities of recognition’.\(^{15}\) Since that implication is indefensible, realism should be rejected. This is the argument I refer to as ‘the argument from inaccessibility’.

The argument from inaccessibility is an argument for ethical anti-realism generally. It doesn’t specifically favor expressivist versions over, say, error-theoretic ones. The argument from ambiguity, by contrast, does pertain especially to expressivism. Its target is not the

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\(^{13}\) \textit{Moral Realism}, 197.

\(^{14}\) Indeed, some moral realists make the claim that the truths they posit can be known and even that some truths are in fact known, part of their doctrine (See, e.g., Boyd, R., ‘How To Be a Moral Realist’, 182.)

metaphysical part of realism (the claim that there are moral facts) but rather what realism says about the nature of moral convictions and the semantical claims associated with those views.

Realists think that moral terms such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc., refer to ‘real properties’. They also think that to disagree morally is to have conflicting beliefs about some objective state of affairs. The main premise of the argument from ambiguity is the claim that, even if we assume that, say, ‘right’ is used to refer to some property, there are disputes over its application that cannot plausibly be construed as conflicts of belief, since there are independent reasons against thinking that the parties use the term to refer to the same property. The point is that, given that there is no conflict of beliefs in these cases, realists must conclude that they do not constitute genuine moral disagreements. And the problem is that, in many of the pertinent cases, that conclusion is highly counterintuitive. An expressivist, by contrast, does not have to construe the pertinent disputes as being merely apparent, since, on her view, to disagree morally is to have clashing conative attitudes towards the item being judged rather than conflicting beliefs about it. Thus, she can accept that a given dispute over a moral term cannot plausibly be construed as a conflict of beliefs and still insist that it represents a genuine moral disagreement.16

The disputes that the advocates of the argument from ambiguity primarily have in mind are those that are radical. In support of the thesis that such disputes do not represent conflicts of beliefs (even assuming that the term whose application is disputed is used to refer to some property) they appeal to certain general views about meaning and reference. The assumption that the parties to a dispute about the application of a given term refer to the same property leads to the conclusion that one of them is in error. On the semantical views in question, this assumption is undermined if there is no way of explaining that error, in terms of some cognitive shortcoming that one of the parties is subjected to,17 and the point is that if a dispute over a moral sentence is radical there is no such explanation. Thus, a realist cannot, given the pertinent semantical views, plausibly construe such disputes as being genuine moral disagreements. And, again, that is the wrong conclusion, in view of the fact that such disputes

16 Nicholas Sturgeon regards this as ‘a standard argument for noncognitivism’ (‘Contents and Causes’, Philosophical Studies 61, 1991, 20). It can be attributed to expressivists such as, Simon Blackburn, Richard, Hare and C.L. Stevenson. See Blackburn, S., Spreading the Word, 168; ‘Just Causes’, Philosophical Studies 61, 1991, 4; Hare, R., The Language of Morals, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, 148ff; and Stevenson, C.L., Facts and Values, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, 49. Notice that this argument does not presuppose that any radical disputes over moral sentences actually exists. It is sufficient if there are possible cases of failures of co-reference such that it would be implausible to construe them as merely apparent.

17 For example, this is an implication of Davidson’s principle of charity. See, e.g., his ‘Objectivity and Practical Reason’, in E. Ullman-Margalit (ed.), Reasoning Practically, Oxford University Press, 25.
still in various ways display an appearance of a genuine disagreement. Rawls and Nozick and
other philosophers who are arguably free of cognitive shortcomings do clearly not seem to
talk past each other.

What makes this argument into a potentially powerful one is the fact that the general
semantical views on which it relies are neutral relative to realism and anti-realism in ethics.
Thus, they allow its advocates to provide independent grounds for its main premise (the claim
that the pertinent disputes cannot be construed as conflicts of belief even assuming that the
disputed term refers to some property). Of course, there are competitors to those semantical
views, and the argument may be questioned also in other ways. However, I shall ignore these
objections, as well as the objections that can be raised against the argument from
inaccessibility. For notice that my aim is not to defend the arguments but rather to establish a
sort of conditional claim: That one can plausibly deny anti-realism about epistemology and
meta-ethics even given that the arguments are compelling.18

4. Disagreement and convergence in epistemology

Those who insist that the disagreement over epistemic issues is just as problematic from a
realist point of view as that which occurs in ethics commonly illustrate this claim by referring
to disputes among philosophers. Reliabilists and evidentialists debate about the conditions
under which beliefs are epistemically justified, just as, say, Kantians and utilitarians disagree
about when actions are right. But it is in addition stressed that there is much epistemic
disagreement also among non-philosophers. For example, Terence Cuneo appeals to the
controversies about the rationality of belief in God and of trusting the Bible.19 Other examples
concern scientific issues. Thus, people disagree about the plausibility of the theory of
evolution and about the reasonableness of believing in human-induced global warming. Some
ethical anti-realists focus not on intra-cultural disagreements but on inter-cultural ones, as
differences of that kind are thought to be especially difficult to reconcile with a realist view.
However, although the question of if there are such differences concerning epistemic issues is
less well researched, some studies indicate that this may be so.20

18 The argument from inaccessibility and the argument from ambiguity are given more detailed accounts
and are discussed at length in my Moral Disagreement, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

19 The Normative Web, 110f.

20 See, e.g., Weinberg, J. M., Nichols, S. & Stich, S., ‘Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions’ Philosophical
Topics, 29, 2001, 429-460, and Nisbett, R., Peng, K., Choi, I. and Norenzayan, A., ‘Culture and Systems of
Do these examples show that there is no room for the mixed verdict that I am exploring? For someone who wants to reject that suggestion, one option is to argue that in spite of the similarities the disagreement that occurs over epistemic issues is after all less deep or radical. Another is to concede that it is as radical but to appeal to other differences between the discourses that nevertheless allow us to draw different conclusions. I shall pursue the first option in this section and the second in the next.

When assessing the relevance of some of the examples Cuneo mention, one faces certain problems of interpretation. The types of epistemic judgments that I am focusing on include claims to the effect that a hypothesis provides a better account of some data than its competitors. However, whether the differing judgments about, say, the rationality of belief in God really do involve such assessments or represent instances of the other categories that are exemplified in the list provided in section 3 is not always clear. In support of their differing views, people adduce many different types of considerations, including some that rather belong to discussions about ethics and practical rationality. For example, some motivate their judgments about the reasonableness of belief in God à la Pascal with ideas about the (non-epistemic) costs or benefits of having that belief. As practical considerations of that type are not clearly relevant to the purely epistemic type of assessments on which I focus, the relevance of those views and disagreements may be questioned.

In so far as the disputes in question do represent disagreements of the relevant kind, many of them can obviously be dismissed as being non-radical. That is, they can be attributed to a lack of training in handling statistics or probabilities, or to disagreement about or ignorance of non-epistemic facts, etc. For example, many participants to the global warming-debate have just a fragmentary understanding of the available evidence and of the models that are adduced. Something similar surely holds for much moral disagreement. But it is important to real that, in the context of the argument from inaccessibility, the crucial question is if those disagreements would survive even if the parties were to free themselves from the influence of the pertinent shortcoming. Some moral disagreements would surely not. However, many moral disagreements would, as the appeal to disagreements between professional ethicists is supposed to show. This is the basis for the contrast I shall seek to establish.

In other words, let us call a process in which people manage to resolve their disagreements through overcoming their cognitive shortcomings ‘rational convergence’. It is to the (alleged) absence of rational convergence in ethics that advocates of the argument from inaccessibility appeal, as it is the existence of such convergence that the argument from
inaccessibility assumes is predicted by a realist view. Is there more evidence of rational convergence regarding epistemic issues? I shall argue that there is.

My argument is based on the assumption that I made in section 2— that an ethical anti-realist who relies on moral disagreement can plausibly deny that the disagreement that exists in the sciences generates a similar conclusion, on the ground that there is in those areas convergence of the kind predicted by a realist view. The main point I want to make is simply that if we suppose that this shows that there is a contrast between ethics and the sciences we are entitled to conclude that there is a similar contrast between ethics and epistemology.

The point of departure is the observation that the convergence in the sciences is accompanied with and indeed explained by a parallel convergence regarding epistemic issues; i.e., issues concerning how to evaluate the theories and hypotheses over which agreement has emerged. The prior controversies about those theories reflect prior disagreements about their epistemic credentials, for example about the extent to which the available evidence supports them, and what explains the convergence on those theories is the capacity of inquirers to overcome such epistemic disagreements. Indeed, the convergence that the history of science displays can to some extent be said to consist in convergence on assessments about what the evidence suggests. After all, the attitudes scientists have toward the hypotheses they favor are not always best characterized as belief-states proper. Rather, in that scientists often stress the fallibility of their conclusions, it might be better to characterize those attitudes as being epistemic assessments, such as assessments to the effect that the theories they favor obtain more support from the evidence that is presently at hand, or that they are more likely to be true than their competitors (in a non-frequency sense of ‘likely’).

In other words, it is through their capacity to resolve epistemic issues that inquirers come to agree on substantive issues within the disciplines they work. It is plausible to assume, moreover, that what underlies this capacity is the fact that there is significant overlap regarding general views about how competing hypotheses and explanations are to be evaluated, for example in relation to criteria such as simplicity, scope and fruitfulness. This overlap ensures that the considerations that are considered significant by some of the parties are not dismissed as irrelevant by others. Unless there had been such overlap, it is unlikely that there had been any convergence. For example, consider the onset of the scientific revolution. Arguably, what sparked this process was the emergence of agreement about more modern methodological, empiricist ideas, which in turn was due, at least on the conventional story, to the fact that a powerful source of cognitive shortcomings (such as biases and
groundless preconceptions) was losing its grip on the culture, namely religion and its institutions.

As scientists are better trained than ordinary folk in probability theory, statistics, and other fields relevant to making epistemic assessments, the fact that they can resolve their epistemic disagreements illustrates how the weakened influence of cognitive shortcomings help to generate agreement. Thus, it sheds more light over the issue of the extent to which such disputes are radical than the disputes among ordinary folk regarding the rationality of believing in, for example, human-induced global warming. It is a telling fact that there is virtually no disagreement about that question among experts.

There is also a readily available explanation of the overlap regarding general criteria that help to account for the convergence, both among scientists and ordinary folk. Our capacity to make epistemic assessments has an evolutionary background, as does our disposition to adjust our beliefs so that they conform to our assessments of that kind (so that we tend to drop beliefs that we deem are in conflict with the evidence, etc). Presumably, it was selected because it helped our ancestors to detect important truths and to avoid errors in situations they were often confronted with. Given the dangers of making such errors, there has been a selection pressure in favor of dispositions to make epistemic assessments that promote that aim; i.e., that are truth-conducive in the sense that if a subject revises her beliefs in accordance with the assessments in question, she does, in many cases, avoid the relevant types of errors. As Quine put it, ‘“[c]reatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind.”’

The point is not that this account provides a compelling response to skeptical worries about induction. The point is rather that, in so far as the contents of our present epistemic judgments are shaped by the evolved tendencies, there is a limit to the diversity we may find, given that only those that are truth-conducive in the sense indicated above might be expected to have evolved.

Of course, one may offer an evolutionary explanation also of our capacity to form moral convictions. But in that case, the story is going to be different. On the best version of an evolutionary account of our moral views, it does not assume that they are the results of dispositions that are truth-conducive (nor does it exclude it, of course). Rather, it assumes that those dispositions have been selected because they helped our ancestors to cooperate and to handle certain collective actions problems by constraining their concern for their self-

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21 Quine, W.v., ‘Natural Kinds’. In *Ontological relativity and other essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, 126. Obviously, this is not an independent reason to resist skeptical qualms about induction, as our justification for the evolutionary theory in turn relies presupposes that induction may be trusted.
interest. However, as radically different convictions could serve that role—it is enough that they prompt agents to go some way towards acting in the interests of the group as a whole—the forces of natural selection have allowed for greater latitude regarding the contents of the convictions the capacity gives rise to. Thus it does not predict the same type of overlap or basic agreement. This helps to explain why moral disagreement is deeper and more radical than epistemic disagreement.

5. Ambiguity in epistemology

I have taken the fact that scientists tend to resolve their disagreements by gathering more evidence and by quite generally enhancing their cognitive competence (in respects that we have independent reasons to regard as improvements) to suggest that there is more evidence for the existence of the rational convergence in the case of epistemic issues than in the case of ethics. The point is that many moral disagreements survive such improvements, as the disputes among philosophers illustrates. An obvious objection to this argument is that philosophers disagree also about epistemic issues. If the disagreements among professional ethicists are supposed to show that ethics does not display the type of convergence predicted by a realist view, why isn’t the disagreement among professional epistemologists supposed to have similar implications?

However, those disputes lack the sort of relevance that the debates between moral philosophers have. The disputes in question concern the nature of epistemic justification. For example, internalists and externalists debate about whether a person can be justified in holding a belief without in some sense being aware of some evidence that supports it. However, this and many of the other issues that epistemologists address are distinct from, and have no clear implications for, the types of assessments scientists are able to reach agreement about. Thus, they do not undermine the claim that that process represents convergence of the type predicted by a realist view. In the ethical case, this isn’t so, since the theories moral philosophers ponder do have implications for the same issues (the status of abortion, or of meat-eating, etc) that are discussed by non-philosophers.

Notice in this context that ‘epistemic justification’ is a technical term with no clear counterparts in ordinary language. It is, of course, linked in some ways to the use of ordinary

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22 For an explanation along those lines, see Joyce, J., The Evolution of Morality, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. Notice that the explanation does not exclude that the evolved tendencies to accept moral views are truth-conducive, but the point is that it does not (unlike the evolutionary explanation of our tendencies to make epistemic assessments) assume it either.

23 I develop these ideas further in my Moral Disagreement, chapter 6.
language expressions (such as ‘reason to believe’). But it is intended to capture and purify just one of the aspects people focus on when evaluating beliefs. Therefore, what to say about it is not clearly relevant to the plausibility of the versions of the anti-realist meta-ethical theories that apply to epistemic judgments, given that those theories concern the general use of a crucial chunk of ordinary language. In the moral case, there are no such worries, as moral philosophers employ the same terms in expressing their theories as those non-philosophers use in stating their convictions (‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc).

In fact, in the case of the disputes about epistemic justification, I am willing to concede that a response of the type that one of the anti-realist arguments from disagreement focuses on (the argument from ambiguity) is the appropriate one. According to the response in question, the fact that disputes about the application of ‘right’ are radical shows that the terms refers, if at all, to different properties for different speakers. In my view, it can plausibly be argued that the same type of interpretive diversity holds for ‘epistemic justification’. Indeed, something to that effect has been argued, for example by William Alston, who thinks that the best explanation of the diversity of theories about epistemic justification is that ‘justified’, as used by epistemologists, fails to pick out a single, unique objective status of beliefs. Consequently, he argues that the participants in the debate cannot plausibly be seen as disagreeing about the same property.24 What I also hold, however, is that one can plausibly deny that this conclusion supports epistemic expressivism, even if one grants that the same conclusion about moral terms supports ethical expressivism.25

The reason has in part to do with the just mentioned fact that ‘epistemic justification’ is a technical term. Thus, its relevance to epistemic expressivism is questionable, in so far as that position is supposed to be analogous with ethical expressivism (whose aim is to account for ordinary language). However, even ignoring that point, there are considerations suggesting that the argument from ambiguity fails to apply.

To repeat, the reason why the (alleged) fact that radical moral disputes cannot be construed as conflicts of beliefs is supposed to support expressivism is that those disputes may still display an appearance of a genuine disagreement. Since expressivists can construe those disputes as being genuine disagreements in spite of the fact that they don’t represent conflicts of beliefs, they can, unlike realists, account for the appearance. This argumentation


25 This is the second way of responding to the appeal to the alleged similarities between the disagreements that exist in ethics and those that arise in epistemology mentioned at the start of section 4.
relies on the counter-intuitiveness of the conclusion that the parties to radical moral disagreements talk past each other, and that the appearance of a genuine conflict that those disputes display is worth saving.\textsuperscript{26} The point I want to make is simply that the parallel conclusion about radical epistemic disagreements is less counter-intuitive and that there is in those cases no appearance of a genuine conflict that deserves being saved.

Notice for example that Alston is not tempted to draw any expressivist conclusions from his diagnosis. What he suggests is instead a reconstruction of the debate, by skipping the term ‘epistemic justification’ and by replacing the search for a theory about when beliefs are justified with another approach.\textsuperscript{27} Presumably, the reason for this revisionary proposal is that the conclusion that epistemologists talk past each other is the correct one. In the ethical case, the related proposal of dropping terms such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc, would be more revisionary, as the philosophers’ use of those terms is continuous with that of ordinary folk. Dropping those terms would amount to simply failing to engage with some of the issues that ordinary people are engaged in.

In my view, failed co-reference is not only likely to hold for ‘epistemic justification’ but also in many contexts for the expressions non-philosophers use to state their epistemic views (such as ‘reasonable to believe’). However, in those cases too, the conclusion that the parties talk past each other seems also often to be the proper one. For example, consider Cuneo’s example with the disputes about the rationality in belief in God. As I noted earlier, in support of their differing views, people adduce many different types of considerations, including some that rather belong to discussions about ethics and practical rationality. Others, by contrast, treat those considerations as irrelevant. The proper diagnosis of this case does not seem to be that the parties disagree genuinely and that we should accommodate this fact by adopting an expressivist concept of a genuine epistemic disagreement. The appropriate diagnosis seems rather to be that they don’t disagree genuinely so that there is no need to adopt such a concept. Or take disputes over sentences that report the probabilities of various scenarios, perhaps by assigning numbers to them. As people are not aware of, or distinguish clearly between, the frequency interpretation and other interpretations it is difficult to attribute any determinate views to them at all on the basis of their verdicts to such sentences, let alone views that can plausibly be seen to be in conflict. Again, there is no appearance of a genuine disagreement worth preserving.

\textsuperscript{26} For a defense of the argument see my Moral Disagreement, chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{27} His so-called ‘desiderata approach’. See his Beyond “Justification”.
Finally, in so far as there is an appearance of a real disagreement in the case of the disputes about epistemic justification worth saving, it is doubtful if is best explained by construing them as being collisions of conative attitudes. There are independent grounds for adopting an expressivist account in the ethical case that are lacking in the epistemic case. Thus, part of the reason why the expressivist account of the appearance of a real disagreement between the parties of radical moral disputes has some plausibility is that those disputes are in a rather direct way related to practical issues about what to do. Once it is settled that a course of action is, say, morally obligatory then there is little room for further discussion. In the epistemic case, the connection to what to do is more indirect, both because what to believe is not up to us, and because, even if it were, there would be room for further discussion. Roughly, the disputes about epistemic justification concern where to set the bar in order for someone to have knowledge given the folk concept of that phenomenon. Clearly one can agree on those standards, and still have different attitudes toward beliefs that satisfy them. This means that one reason for explaining any persisting appearances of a real disagreement in expressivist terms is lacking in the case of the disputes about epistemic justification.

6. Metaethics
I shall now briefly turn to meta-ethics. Many of the foregoing remarks apply here as well, and indeed even more clearly. Meta-ethics is almost exclusively a concern for philosophers. In so far as determinate meta-ethical views can be attributed to non-philosophers at all, the disagreements between them shed little light on the question of whether inquirers would agree if they were free of cognitive shortcomings. For example, non-philosophers are seldom aware of relevant distinctions and arguments or of the general philosophical views (in the philosophy of language, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind) that can be invoked in support of the various meta-ethical positions, and so on.

The disagreements between meta-ethicists can also to a large extent be attributed to cognitive shortcomings. This is not because meta-ethicists are less smart than philosophers doing ethics. It rather has to do with the input-dimension; i.e., the quality and amount of the evidence on which the various positions are based. As Michael Smith has suggested, there are mainly two types of considerations that are thought to be relevant.28 Considerations of the first type suggest that moral convictions are intimately related to motivation. Thus, it is claimed that, in general, if a person judges that she is morally required to φ she has some tendency to

φ. This feature is often taken to support expressivism, while considerations of the second type (those that Smith summarizes with the phrase ‘the objectivity of moral judgment’) are rather supposed to support realism. For example, it is stressed that moral convictions are expressed with declarative (rather than imperative) sentences and that people usually have some concern for the consistency among their moral convictions.

Even if practically all practitioners agree about these claims and acknowledge their relevance to theory choice in meta-ethics, we see quite little progress. Presumably, this is due to the fact that the claims in question underdetermine theory choice. They simply provide a too meager basis for adjudicating between the competing theories. This does not mean that no more evidence is to be had, however. Meta-ethical theories are, I submit, best seen as a type of empirical theories. However, we have neither come close to articulating them in a way that allows for real testing nor made any serious attempts to systematically collect relevant data. Given the relevance of that data, the positions that have emerged could easily be described as a kind of blind guesses. It would therefore be highly premature to draw anti-realist conclusions on the basis of the existing disagreement. Of course, given any viable theory that is put forward in normative ethics, empirical facts are relevant also to many moral issues. However, the idea that the theories themselves are empirical theories is more contentious, as is, accordingly, any attempt to explain away disagreements by appealing to that idea.

The fact that the claims made by meta-ethicists are based on a meagre amount of evidence does not exclude that the type of interpretative diversity I have discussed in the case of ‘epistemic justification’ also holds for many expressions that meta-ethicists use. For example, consider the debate about the possibility of amoralists; i.e., inquirers who have genuine moral convictions but lack altogether any motivation to act accordingly. Some intuit that such individuals are possible, and take this to refute expressivism and other theories that entail the internalist view that it is necessarily so that if a person judges that she is morally required to φ she is motivated to φ. Others have the opposite intuition, however. They think that, if someone affirms, say, that she acts wrongly, but still lacks the motivation to stop doing it, she is merely using ‘wrong’ in an inverted commas sense. It is not far-fetched to conclude from this difference that the theorists assign different referents to ‘moral conviction’.

If that is true, then, given a realist understanding of the content of meta-ethical claims, we must conclude that the participants of many meta-ethical disputes talk past each other. This might invite the suspicion that a realist about meta-ethics is vulnerable to the argument from ambiguity. But in this case it is clear that there are plausible non-expressivist explanations of the appearance of a real disagreement that the disputes between internalists and externalists in
meta-ethics still disply; explanations that are not available in ethics. For we may construe those disputes as disagreements about how ‘moral conviction’ should be defined or which property it should capture, to serve some theoretical or explanatory purpose. For example, we may motivate a stipulation of that type with reference to its role in a more general account of human behavior, that assigns a special role to the states picked out by the expression in question, and that is responsive to a more extensive set of evidence than that normally thought relevant in meta-ethics. It is not reasonable to look upon radical moral disputes, such as disputes about whether an action is right or obligatory, in the same way, simply because those terms are not parts of any such explanatory scheme. Again, a stipulation of that kind would merely represent a change of subject. I conclude thus that one can accept ethical expressivism on the basis of the argument from ambiguity, without committing oneself to an expressivist view about meta-ethics, even if one concedes that the type of interpretive diversity that, according to the argument, holds for ‘right’, ‘wrong’, etc, also hold for terms used for expressing meta-ethical theories.

7. Concluding remarks
The debate about the scope of the argument from disagreement suffers from a certain amount of oversimplification, at least given the way the debate is presently being conducted. It is more or less taken for granted that whether disagreement supports anti-realism is an all-or-nothing matter—that anti-realism either holds for all areas in which disagreement occurs (i.e., all areas), or for none. In my view, this attitude is based on a lack of attention to the details of the arguments that arguably take us from the existence of diversity to an anti-realist conclusion. A closer look shows that disagreement in an area generates such a conclusion only given certain rather specific assumptions about its nature and about other aspects of the pertinent discourse. This makes room for a more nuanced picture, as I have tried to illustrate by arguing that we may coherently be ethical anti-realists on the basis of moral disagreement and still retain a realist view both about meta-ethics and epistemology.

Of the two areas I have compared to ethics the prospects of establishing a contrast probably seem more promising, at least prima facie, in the case of meta-ethics. This is presumably due to the fact that meta-ethical claims are commonly not conceived of as being normative. The terms used for expressing the epistemological judgments that I have focused on are, by comparison, paradigmatically normative. That is, we use basically the same

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29 I explore this suggestion in Moral Disagreement, chapter 6.
expressions in stating those views as those we use when expressing our moral convictions (‘reason’, ‘justified’, ‘should’, etc). This may make the idea that those discourses should be uniformly treated from a meta-perspective almost irresistible. However, some similarities are, though striking, superficial, and do not exclude that there are also differences that ultimately turn out to be more important. For example, all jade stones have certain common characteristics. Still, the chemical structure of some such stones differs from that of others (there is “nephrite” jade and “jadeitite”). In the discussion of the applicability of the argument from inaccessibility and the argument from ambiguity to epistemology and ethics, respectively, I have argued that there are such differences.

There is a deeper explanation of why it is difficult to make in particular the argument from ambiguity work in the epistemic case; an explanation that also suggest why it is more generally so that it is doubtful if the traditional meta-ethical theories can plausibly be applied to moral judgments. What makes meta-ethics a worthwhile topic is the fact that the use of the expressions employed when stating moral convictions is homogenous enough to give hopes of formulating a general theory that applies to most if not all competent language users. It is partly this homogeneity that gives reason to think that the convictions the sentences are used to express form a distinctive and well-defined class of attitudes that it is meaningful to have a theory about.30

In the epistemic case, things are messier. There is a practice of evaluating beliefs and propositions from an epistemic point of view (roughly, in relation to the aim of attaining true beliefs and avoiding error), and there is a vocabulary that is generally used for expressing such evaluations. This vocabulary includes, as I just noted, many expressions that are also used to express moral evaluations. However, although there is overlap, there are several more or less distinct uses of the pertinent terms in epistemic contexts, partly because people can be seen to have different epistemic aims in mind. For example, some emphasize the bit about avoiding error more than others, and are therefore disposed to adopt stricter demands than others regarding when to count beliefs as reasonable. Moreover, some motivate their views about the appropriate level of strictness with practical concerns while others think them irrelevant. We should therefore be open to the idea that a given account, be it realist or not, could be true of the use of some of the pertinent terms but not of others and that different accounts could be true of different speakers. This undermines the viability of searching for the

30 According to expressivists, of course, the use of these terms is not homogenous enough to ensure co-reference but still homogenous enough to ensure that it is meaningful to say something general about their meaning or function.
kind of general theory that is pursued in meta-ethics. I think this is why a meta-discussion of the sort meta-ethicists engage in has not really emerged independently in epistemology. After all, in general, people consider the possibility of developing analogous theories about epistemic judgments just to make a *meta-ethical* point.

References


