

## The Epistemic Significance of Moral Disagreement

Dustin Locke  
Claremont McKenna College

**Note: the published version of this paper contains an important typo in clause (3B) in definition B of ‘prima-facie dissenting peer’, both as it occurs in section 4 and is repeated in section 9 of the paper. The typo has been corrected in the present document.**

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*Unfortunately, we possess no analogue to an eye exam, by which we might determine whose moral vision is askew and whose is in good working order.* -Sarah McGrath, 2007: 99

### 1. Introduction

Take any one of my moral beliefs. More likely than not, there is some competent person who rejects it. Is it nonetheless appropriate for me to stick to my belief? Or should I be more conciliatory, significantly reducing my confidence in the disputed belief, or perhaps withdrawing my belief all together? What, in short, is the epistemic significance of moral disagreement?

Common wisdom isn’t much help here. On the one hand, we’re told that people should often ‘agree to disagree’. This suggests that it can be reasonable to stick to one’s moral beliefs in the face of disagreement, provided that one allows others to stick to their beliefs. On the other hand, we’re told that it’s arrogant to think of oneself as ‘knowing the truth’ when other reasonable people think otherwise. This suggests that merely allowing others to think as they do is not enough: proper humility requires significantly reducing confidence in one’s own belief. I think it’s no surprise that common wisdom is conflicted here: our question turns out to be surprising complicated, hanging on some of the most nuanced and controversial claims in contemporary epistemology. The question is for that reason all the more exciting. It’s also pressing: with technology making our political and cultural borders ever more permeable, the need to understand the epistemic significance of moral disagreement has never been greater.

While this paper might have been organized around competing *views* about the epistemic significance of moral disagreement, it is instead organized around a certain ‘Core Argument’—an argument roughly to the effect that known moral disagreement of a certain sort ought to lead one to suspend one’s moral belief. Focusing on a particular argument will give our discussion a greater focus than it otherwise might have had. And I don’t think it will be *too* focused: readers with sympathies for another argument are still likely to find most of the relevant issues touched on here.

I begin by distinguishing the kind of argument to be developed in this paper from other kinds of argument from moral disagreement (section two). I then consider some natural initial thoughts about the epistemic significance of moral disagreement, eventually working up to a rough statement of the Core Argument (section three). I then give a precise statement of the Core Argument, clearly defining the kind of moral disagreement at issue (section four). After a discussion of the applicability of the Core Argument’s conclusion (section five), I assess its various components, drawing heavily on the epistemology literature on ‘peer disagreement’ (sections six through eight). Finally, I consider what the Core Argument’s conclusion has to say about cases of *radical* moral disagreement (section nine).

## 2. Metaphysical vs. Epistemological Arguments from Disagreement

The *locus classicus* for the kind of argument to be developed and discussed in this essay—the Core Argument—is Sarah McGrath’s ‘Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise’ (2007). McGrath’s argument explicitly and *merely* aims to ‘undermine moral knowledge by showing that... we are not in a position to have anything like the amount of moral knowledge that we ordinarily take ourselves to have’ (88). This stands in contrast, McGrath notes, to ‘the most familiar arguments from [moral] disagreement in the literature’, which ‘purport to establish conclusions about the metaphysics of morality: that there are no moral facts, or that there are no moral properties, or that the moral facts are relative rather than absolute’ (87). McGrath thus draws a distinction between her ‘epistemological argument’—with its purely epistemological conclusion—and familiar ‘metaphysical arguments’—with their familiar metaphysical conclusions.

It’s worth dwelling on this point for a bit, since it’s possible to rationally reconstruct traditional metaphysical arguments in such a way that they involve epistemological arguments. Take, for example, John Mackie’s famous (1977) argument from disagreement against moral realism. The central claim of Mackie’s argument is that anti-realist—according to whom there are no properties such as *moral rightness* and *moral wrongness*—can offer a ‘better’ explanation of actual moral disagreement than what the moral realist can offer. The realist explanation of disagreement, Mackie assumes, would have to be one according to which moral judgments ‘express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values’ (1977: 37). Granting Mackie that this, or something near it, is the kind of explanation that the moral realist will have to offer, why is this explanation of moral disagreement supposed to be *worse* than the best explanation the anti-realist can offer? Unfortunately, Mackie doesn’t say. But we can speculate.

Perhaps the thought is that once the realist appeals to whatever ‘distorting influences’ on our moral judgments he is prepared to appeal to—e.g., self-interest—there is no reason to appeal to anything *further* in the explanation of our moral beliefs—in particular, there is no reason to appeal to objective moral properties. Thus, one might conclude that the anti-realist explanation—which merely appeals to those factors that are according to the realist distorting factors—is all things considered *simpler* than the realist explanation. If Mackie’s argument proceeds in this way, it is open to a serious objection. From the perspective of the moral realist, who *independently believes* that there are objective moral properties, a hypothesis that appeals to objective moral properties is for that reason no worse than one that does not (Russ Schafer-Landau [2003: 219]). The basic idea here is that when deciding which hypothesis offers the best explanation of a given phenomenon, the relevant notion of ‘simplicity’ is measured against what one has independent grounds for believing. Now the anti-realist might protest that we have no independent grounds for believing in moral properties. But if that’s so, then it seems that the argument from moral disagreement becomes an unnecessary fifth wheel, at best refuting a view that no one has any reason to endorse anyway.

There is, however, another way that Mackie might have argued that the realist explanation—which, we’re assuming, must appeal to ‘seriously inadequate and badly distorted perceptions’ of objective moral properties—is worse than the anti-realist explanation. Leaving simplicity considerations aside, Mackie might have appealed to a certain *epistemological* argument from disagreement. In particular, he might have argued that what makes the realist explanation of disagreement worse than the anti-realist explanation is that one cannot endorse the realist explanation or moral disagreement without *undermining* one’s endorsement of moral realism (Don Loeb [1998]). On this interpretation, the first step in the argument is the claim that if one endorses

**Big Trouble.** Our moral judgments express seriously inadequate and badly distorted perceptions of objective moral properties.

one cannot rationally continue to endorse one’s moral judgments. Consider, by analogy, someone who thinks to himself

*There’s a ball of wax in front of me. But all of my empirical judgments, including the one I just made, are based on seriously inadequate and badly distorted perceptions of my physical environment. Still, there’s a ball of wax in front of me.*

This position isn't *logically inconsistent*—everything here thought might be true. But it is plausibly rationally inconsistent—it is plausibly irrational to continue to believe *p* while consciously believing that one's belief that is ill-founded.

Suppose it's true, then, that one cannot rationally endorse one's moral judgments while simultaneously endorsing Big Trouble. If it's also true that the realist's belief in objective moral properties is (in part but essentially) based on her moral judgments—e.g., if believing that some things are wrong forms an essential part of the basis upon which one believes that there is an objective property of moral wrongness—then it seems that one cannot rationally endorse Big Trouble without giving up one's moral realism. But Big Trouble entails moral realism. So Big Trouble is not a position that one can rationally endorse. So the only explanation of moral disagreement open to the realist, according to this argument, is an explanation that one cannot rationally endorse.

Much remains to be said about the strength of the argument just presented. The point here, however, is merely to illustrate that McGrath's distinction between metaphysical arguments from disagreement, on the one hand, and epistemological arguments from disagreement, on the other, is not quite as clean as we might have hoped: on the reconstruction of Mackie's argument I just gave, the argument involves an epistemological argument from disagreement. This is not to say that McGrath's distinction isn't both sound and useful. It's just to say that, in practice, we'll need to watch out for metaphysical arguments that *involve* epistemological arguments. There are, moreover, important differences between McGrath's epistemological argument and the epistemological argument at work in the reconstructed version of Mackie's metaphysical argument.

First, the epistemological argument at work in the reconstruction of Mackie's argument is a *reductio*: it aims to show that *if* one endorses a realist explanation of moral disagreement—Big Trouble—*then* one's moral judgments are unjustified, and this in turn is meant to show that a realist explanation of moral disagreement is inherently unstable. McGrath's argument, by contrast, aims to show that, given what we know about moral disagreement, you *ought* to embrace a limited moral skepticism: you ought to believe that you don't have as much moral knowledge as what many people think they have. McGrath does not (merely) attempt to establish that this skeptical conclusion is implied by some metaphysical view—she attempts to establish this skeptical conclusion.

Second, the epistemological argument at work in the reconstruction of Mackie's argument is (crucially) ambitious: it aims to show that, from a realist perspective, actual moral disagreement reveals that there is something *deeply problematic about the basic processes* by which we form our moral beliefs, such that, from the perspective of moral realism, we ought to abandon *all* of our moral beliefs. McGrath's argument, by contrast, merely aims to show that where there is (a certain kind of) disagreement on a particular moral issue, you don't know the truth with respect to that particular moral issue. This is not to say that an argument like McGrath's could not be generalized so that it implies widespread or even global moral skepticism: if there is (the relevant kind of) disagreement on *all* moral issues, then an argument like McGrath's would imply global moral skepticism.

The present paper follows McGrath's lead. Here I develop and discuss an argument—the Core Argument—to the effect that where a certain kind of moral disagreement exists, there one ought to be skeptical. In the next section I begin with some initial thoughts along these lines, ultimately leading up to the Core Argument.

### 3. From Initial Thoughts to the Core Argument

I believe that it's wrong to consume factory-farmed meat. Others whom I rationally believe to be my 'moral peers' disagree. By 'moral peer', I mean roughly someone who is (1) aware of all the same relevant information that I am aware of—e.g., the fact that factory-farmed animals are kept in such and such conditions—and (2) just as likely as I am, given a body of information, to arrive at an appropriate moral view (Adam Elga [2007], cf. Eileen John [2014]). On first thought, disagreement with a moral peer seems to have profound epistemic significance. If I don't take myself to be generally better than my peer at figuring out the moral truth, and if we are aware of all of the same relevant information, shouldn't I suspend judgment on the moral permissibility of consuming factory-farmed meat, at least for now?

On second thought, moral disagreement seems to have no epistemic significance. Either I do or do not have good reasons for believing that it is wrong to consume factory-farmed meat. If I have good reasons for believing as I do, then my belief is justified. If not, not. It seems, then, that moral disagreement *per se* has nothing to do with it: what matters is simply whether I have *good reasons* for believing as I do.

On third thought, my peers are pretty good at figuring stuff out, and when someone who is pretty good at figuring stuff out believes *not-p*, this very fact is itself a good reason to believe *not-p*. So we cannot just say that whether my moral belief is justified depends on whether I have good reasons for believing as I do and does not depend on whether others disagree with me: it's plausible, but not uncontroversial, that the facts about what my peers believe on moral matters are *among* the facts that count for and against believing as I do (Karen Jones [1999] and Paulina Sliwa [2012]).

On fourth thought, the fact that someone who is pretty good at figuring stuff out believes *not-p* is not, comparatively speaking, very *much* reason to believe *not-p*. In particular, it's not very much reason when compared to my reasons for believing *p* (Thomas Kelly [2005]). I know quite a bit about how factory-farmed meat is produced, I know that the fact that there is so much suffering involved is a *pro tanto* moral reason to avoid contributing to that practice, and I know that people get a relatively small benefit from consuming factory-farmed meat. Knowing these facts gives me a strong reason to believe that it's not morally permissible to consume factory-farmed meat. The mere fact that *someone who is pretty good at figuring stuff out believes that it is not wrong to consume factory-farmed meat* seems to pale in comparison.

On fifth and final thought, my peers' dissenting opinions seem to count against my beliefs in a couple of different ways (Richard Feldman [2006] and John Matheson [2009]). One way is by *rebutting* my belief—that is, by providing me with at least some reason to believe *not-p*. This is the idea behind the 'third thought' above. But another way that a dissenting opinion can count against my belief is by *undermining it*—that is, by turning my good reasons for believing as I do into not-so-good reasons for believing as I do.

Consider an analogy that has nothing to do with morality, and nothing to do with disagreement. Suppose that a friend's dog growls in my direction. At first this is a good reason to believe that the dog sees me as a threat. But then my friend points out that there is a raccoon on a tree just behind me, and that his dog has been trained to growl at raccoons. This new information does not provide me with a reason to believe that the dog does *not* see me as a threat—it does not rebut my belief. But it does provide me with reason to *stop* believing that the dog *does* see me as a threat. It does this by turning what was a good reason for believing that the dog sees me as a threat—the fact that she was growling in my direction—into a not-so-good reason for thinking that she sees me as a threat. In other words, this new information *undermines* my belief that the dog sees me as a threat.

In our 'third thought', we noted that my peer's belief that it is not wrong to consume factory-farmed meat provided me with some reason to believe that it is not wrong. And in our 'fourth thought', we granted that this was so, but noted that such a reason to believe it is not wrong—the mere fact that a peer believes it is not wrong—pales in comparison to my reasons for believing that it is wrong. But the fifth thought insists that this misses the more devastating epistemic significance of my peer's dissenting opinion. According to the fifth thought, I cannot simply weight the fact that my peer believes otherwise against my good reasons for believing as I do, *because the fact my peer believes otherwise turns my good reasons for believing as I do into not-so-good reasons for believing as I do*. In other words, moral disagreement *undermines* justified moral belief. This is the central idea of the argument to be developed and evaluated in this paper—the Core Argument. Let's work it out.

How might disagreement with a moral peer undermine belief? Here's a natural, but ultimately unhelpful thought: if my peer and I have opposed beliefs, then at least one of us must be *wrong*. And if I rationally think that my peer's epistemic credentials are just as good as my own, then it would be inappropriate for me to believe that it is more likely that my peer has got things wrong than that I have.

While the literature contains arguments for conciliation that proceed roughly along these, this attempt to spell out *how* disagreement undermines justified moral belief does little more than simply assume *that* moral disagreement undermines belief. Notice that the argument simply assumes that if I rationally think that my peer's epistemic credentials are just as good as my own, then it would be inappropriate for me to believe that it is more likely that my peer has got things wrong than that I have. To assume this is to simply assume that I do not remain justified in my belief in the face of known disagreement with a peer. For if I *do* remain so-justified, then I *am* justified in believing that it is more likely that my peer has got things wrong than that I have. What we want to know is *why* or *how* known disagreement with a peer undermines belief.

A better attempt to spell out how peer disagreement undermines belief starts, not with the assumption that

(Wrong) If my peer and I have opposed beliefs, then at least one of us must be *wrong*.

But with

(Inappropriate) If my peer and I have opposed beliefs, then at least one of our beliefs must be *inappropriate*.

By an appropriate belief, I mean a belief that one is justified in forming, given one's body of information. Since moral peers by definition form their beliefs on the basis of the same body of information, it's plausible that if my moral peer and I have opposed moral beliefs, then one of us must have formed an inappropriate moral belief (lots more on this below). And if I rationally think that my peer's epistemic credentials are just as good as my own, then it is inappropriate for me to believe that it is more likely that my peer has inappropriate moral belief than that I have an inappropriate moral belief. But this seems to imply that I am rationally required to (at least) withhold from believing that my moral view is appropriate. And this in turn seems to imply that I am rationally required to (at least) drastically reduce my confidence in my moral belief, perhaps abandoning it all together. This, roughly, is the Core Argument.

Before proceeding to a more precise statement of the Core Argument, it's worth noting a couple of key differences between this argument and McGrath's (2007) argument. First, the Core Argument targets not (merely) moral knowledge, but justified moral belief. This is no small difference: some philosophers think that when it comes to deciding how to act, it's what you *know*, and not merely what you *justifiably believe*, that counts. While I doubt it (Locke 2015), these philosophers might be right. If they are, then even if moral disagreement does not threaten justified moral belief, we might still be in trouble, since moral disagreement might still threaten moral knowledge. Second, unlike the conclusion of McGrath's argument, the conclusion of the Core Argument is conditional: *if* one knows that a certain kind of moral disagreement exists, *then* one is not justified in maintaining the disputed moral belief. Aside from some general remarks in sections five and nine, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider whether the relevant kind of moral disagreement actually exists.

#### 4. The Core Argument Refined

To give the Core Argument a fighting chance, we'll need to formulate it a bit more carefully. Specifically, we'll need to replace the rough notion of a 'moral peer' with a more precisely defined notion.

The epistemology literature on so-called 'peer disagreement' tends to focus on cases where someone knows that there is someone else who, despite being in a certain sense their 'epistemic equal', nonetheless disagrees with them on some particular issue. More precisely, the literature tends to focus on cases where there is a what I will call a

##### **Dissenting Prima-facie Peer (Definition A)**

$S_2$  is  $S_1$ 's dissenting prima-facie peer (DPP) if and only if:

- (1A)  $S_1$  has a high degree of confidence that  $p$  and  $S_2$  has a low degree of confidence that  $p$  (and thus a high degree of confidence that not- $p$ ),
- (2A)  $S_1$  rationally believes that  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  have formed their respective degrees of confidence that  $p$  on the basis of the same body of information  $E$ , and
- (3A) Setting aside the reasons for which  $S_1$  formed her credence that  $p$ ,  $S_1$ 's rational degree of confidence that she,  $S_1$ , arrived at an appropriate degree of confidence that  $p$  on the basis of  $E$  is identical to her rational degree of confidence that  $S_2$  arrived at an appropriate degree of confidence that  $p$  on the basis of  $E$ .

A useful but imperfect heuristic for thinking about (3A) is to think about  $S_1$  *before* she forms her degree of confidence that  $p$ . How rationally confident is  $S_1$  that she will form the appropriate degree of confidence that  $p$  on the basis of  $E$ ? How rationally confident is  $S_1$  that  $S_2$  will form the appropriate degree of confidence? Roughly, (3A) is satisfied if and only if these rational degrees of confidence are equal.

While Definition A provides us with a reasonably intuitive notion of a dissenting prima-facie peer, there are several reasons that it won't quite do. First, one need not—nor is it the case that one often should—have a *precise* degree of confidence that some proposition is true. Is my degree of confidence that it will rain today *precisely* .7? No. But it is around there—as I'll say, my degree of confidence is *indeterminate* but *centered on* .7. I'll use the term 'doxastic attitude' to refer to both determine and indeterminate degrees of confidence. I'll then say that two doxastic attitudes are 'opposed' when one attitude is centered on a degree of confidence below .5 and the other is centered on a degree of confidence above .5. The first change to the definition of a DPP will thus involve switching from talk of high versus low degrees of confidence to talk of 'opposed doxastic attitudes'. The other change concerns condition (2A). Note that although (2A) requires  $S_1$  to rationally *believe* that she and  $S_2$  have formed their respective degrees of confidence that  $p$  on the basis of the same body of information  $E$ , (2A) allows for  $S_1$  to be rationally *more confident* that she formed her doxastic attitude on the basis of a given body of information than she is that  $S_2$  formed her belief on the basis of that same body of information. This allowance seems negligible, but it can have big epistemic consequences in cases of disagreement, thus leaving our discussion vulnerable to certain distractions from our main topic.

Putting these considerations together, we will replace Definition A with

**Dissenting Prima-facie Peer (Definition B).**

$S_2$  is  $S_1$ 's dissenting prima-facie peer (DPP) if and only if:

- (1B)  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  have opposed doxastic attitudes with respect to  $p$ .
- (2B)  $S_1$  is rationally certain that  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  have formed their respective doxastic attitudes on the basis of the same body of information  $E$ , and
- (3B) Setting aside the reasons for which  $S_1$  formed her doxastic attitude with respect to  $p$ ,  $S_1$ 's rational doxastic attitude towards the proposition that  *$S_1$  has arrived at the appropriate doxastic attitude towards  $p$  on the basis of  $E$*  is identical to  $S_1$ 's rational doxastic attitude towards the proposition that  *$S_2$  has arrived at the appropriate doxastic attitude towards  $p$  on the basis of  $E$* .

With the notion of a DPP so-defined, we can now offer a step-by-step formulation of the Core Argument.

**The Core Argument**

Let a  $p$ -attitude be a doxastic attitude with respect to  $p$ , and let a  $p$ -DPP be a DPP with respect to  $p$ .

1. For any moral proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then I have a decisive reason to believe that at least one of us has formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude. (premise)
2. For any moral proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then I have no good reason to believe that it is my  $p$ -DPP, and not I, who formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude. (premise)
3. Thus, for any moral proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, I should at least withhold from believing that my  $p$ -attitude is appropriate. (from 1,2)
4. Thus, for any moral proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then it is inappropriate for me to continue to hold my  $p$ -attitude. (from 3)

The conclusion that it is inappropriate for me to continue to hold my  $p$ -attitude is intended to entail that, at a minimum, substantial revision to my  $p$ -attitude is epistemically rationally required. There are difficult questions about exactly *how much* revision is required (Sarah Moss 2011), and whether we ought to be more concerned with the requirements of *practical* rationality than *epistemic* rationality (Catherine Elgin [2010]). Unfortunately, we do not have space to consider these important questions here. Another difficult question is whether the Core Argument generalizes to *all* normative disagreements, forcing us to abandon not only moral judgments but judgments of

practical and epistemic rationality as well. If it does, one might think that this amounts to a *reductio* of the Core Argument (George Sher [2001]). Unfortunately, we don't have space to consider this important issue either.

Most of the remainder of this essay will be concerned with a more or less direct evaluation of the component premises and inferences of the Core Argument. The inference from (1,2) to (3) seems unassailable (but consider this a challenge to assail it!). This leaves us with three components to consider: premise (1), premise (2), and the inference from (3) to (4). I will discuss these in turn. Before doing so, however, let us take a moment to consider the scope of the argument's conclusion.

## 5. Are there DPPs? Idealization, Error Theory, Relativism, and Intuitionism

The conclusion of the Core Argument is conditional: for any moral proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then it is inappropriate for me to continue to hold my  $p$ -attitude. But I almost certainly have no actual DPPs. For someone to be my DPP, I must be rationally certain that they formed their doxastic attitude on the basis of the *exact* same body of information on which I formed mine. Surely there are no such people. One might be tempted to conclude from this that we're wasting our time on DPPs, and thus wasting our time on the Core Argument. Shouldn't we be considering more realistic cases of disagreement?

It is a mistake, I think, to focus directly and exclusively on realistic cases. Realistic cases are incredibly complicated, making it almost impossible to separate the epistemic significance of disagreement from the epistemic significance of other features. Consider an analogy. There are no frictionless pucks or perfect vacuums, but theorizing about such idealizations is central to the practice of physics. Doing so enables physicists to isolate features of more realistic cases, which, considered directly, are simply too complicated to allow for fruitful theorizing. I think it is useful to take a similar approach in philosophy (Frances Kamm [2011], Locke [2014]), although this approach has been rejected by others (Kathleen Wilkes 1994).

That said, one might reasonably insist that we spend time on the Core Argument only if there are actual cases that relevantly resemble DPP disagreement. Such cases will involve at a minimum (1) moral disagreement, and, more controversially, (2) parties who formed their respective doxastic attitudes on the basis of bodies of information that are *not so dissimilar* as to make appropriate radically different doxastic attitudes.

Let's start with (1). Are any ostensible cases of moral disagreement *genuine* cases of moral disagreement? This is partially an empirical question—a question about what sorts of doxastic attitudes people do as a matter of fact have—and partially a philosophical question—about what exactly it is for there to be a *disagreement* between people, and what exactly it is for a disagreement to be a *moral* disagreement (David Wong [1984]). With respect to the latter question, a plausible place to begin is with the thought that there is moral disagreement only if there is some moral proposition  $p$  with respect to which two people have opposed doxastic attitudes.

On some meta-ethical theories, combined with certain theories of propositions, there are no such propositions. Consider, for example, John Mackie's error theory (1977). On Mackie's view, there are no moral properties—no such thing as moral *rightness*, *wrongness*, *etc.* Now consider a version of the so-called 'structured propositions' view, according to which propositions are structures composed of objects, events, properties, and so on. On some versions of this view, the proposition that *it is wrong to consume factory-farmed meat* is a structure composed of the action-type *consuming factory-farmed meat* and the property *moral wrongness*. Given Mackie's error theory, there is no such property as *moral wrongness*, thus no such structure, thus—on the view of propositions under consideration—no such proposition, and thus no such proposition over which people might disagree. Some might see this argument as a *reductio* on the combination of views that generate its conclusion.

A view that might have similar implications is moral subjectivism. On a simple subjectivist view, what I believe when I believe that consuming factory-farmed meat is wrong is: *I [thought in reference to Dustin] disapprove of consuming factory-farmed meat*. When Bridget believes that it is not wrong to consume factory-farmed meat, what she believes, on a simple subjectivist view is: *I [thought in reference to Bridget] do not disapprove of consuming factory-farmed meat*. On such a view, is there one moral proposition about which we disagree? It's doesn't seem so. My belief is *about me*, while Bridget's belief is *about her*. This simple argument is by no means uncontroversial (Teresa Marques [2014] and Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Stephan Torre [forthcoming]).

Let us turn to issue (2). Is it plausible that all actual cases of moral disagreement—supposing there are any—involve people who form their respective moral judgments on the basis of bodies of information that are so dissimilar as to make appropriate radically different doxastic attitudes? To address this question, we should be careful to separate non-moral information—information about, e.g., the hedonic consequences of taking a certain course of action—from moral information—information about, e.g., what kinds of outcomes are morally good/bad or what kinds of acts are morally right/wrong. It is controversial whether there exists such a thing as ‘moral information’, and, if there is, whether two people could have the same non-moral information while having different moral information. But there are views that make this possible. Consider, for example, a view according to which we have ‘intuitive’ access to a realm of non-natural moral truths. A proponent of such a view might insist that it is at least logically possible that some of us have better access to this realm than others (Robert Audi [2004: 60]). If this is what is happening in cases of actual moral disagreement—that is, if actual moral disagreement is the result of people having different degrees of access to the relevant *moral* information—then the lessons we learn from consideration of DPP disagreement might not straight-forwardly carry over to cases of actual moral disagreement (cf. Ernest Sosa’s [2010: 287] discussion of ‘the rational given’ and its relation to the epistemic significance of disagreement).

## 6. On Rejecting Premise (1): Epistemic Permissivism and Epistemic Egocentrism

Recall

1. For any proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then I have a decisive reason to believe that one of us has formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude. (premise)

Epistemic permissivists maintain that for some bodies of information, there is no *unique* appropriate doxastic attitude to form on the basis of that body of information: it is, rather, appropriate to form any one of a set of permissible attitudes. If this is right, then it would seem that the mere fact that my DPP and I have formed distinct attitudes gives me no reason to believe that at least one of us has for an inappropriate attitude.

Sophisticated versions of epistemic permissivism have been defended against common objections to less sophisticated versions (Miriam Shoenfield [2013]). But why would one be tempted to endorse such a view in the first place? To deny permissivism is to insist that there is always a unique doxastic attitude supported by a given body of evidence. This might seem to entail that there is always a unique *and precise* degree of confidence supported by a given body of evidence, which strikes many as implausible (Christensen [2007: fn. 8], cf. Feldman [2000: 681]). But this particular argument for permissivism ignores a rather well-known alternative: indeterminate degrees of confidence (Christensen [2007: fn. 8]). Where the permissivist will insist, say, that both credence .45 is appropriate and credence .55 is appropriate, the proponent of indeterminate credence will insist that the unique appropriate doxastic is one of indeterminate credence, where this indeterminacy ranges (at least) over both .45 and .55.

Another way to try to resist premise (1) of the Core Argument is by appeal to epistemic egocentrism. On this view, the doxastic attitude that it is appropriate for me to have need not be the same as the doxastic attitude it is appropriate for someone else to have, despite the fact that we form our respective doxastic attitude on the basis of the same body of information. Suppose that I believe that  $p$  and Bridget believes that *not-p*. Suppose also that I know that I have formed my belief that  $p$  partially on the basis of the fact that *it seems to me that p* and Bridget has formed her belief that *not-p* partially on the basis of the fact that *it seems to her that not-p*. If Bridget is my DPP, then I must be rationally certain that we have formed our respective beliefs on the basis of the *same* body of information. This means that I know that *it seems to Bridget that not-p*, and I formed by belief that  $p$  partially on the basis of this fact. Mutatis mutandis for Bridget and the fact that *it seems to me that p*. Now, despite the fact that I know that Bridget has formed her belief partially on the basis of the fact that it seems to me that  $p$ , I also know (and so does Bridget), that I have a certain ‘personal relationship’ to that fact that she does not have: I know that I am the subject of that fact—I know (and so does Bridget) that it is *me*, and not her, to whom it seems that  $p$ . Michael Huemer (2011) argues that such distinct relationships to the same information can create an asymmetry in virtue of which Bridget and I are justified in believing different things (Ralph Wedgwood [2010] makes a similar argument). Specifically, Huemer defends a principle I will call



**Treat Yourself!** When it seems to A that  $p$ , this fact provides S with prima facie justification for believing  $p$ . But for any  $B \neq A$ , the fact that it seems to B that  $p$  provides A with no prima facie justification for believing  $p$ , even when A knows (with absolute certainty) that it seems to B that  $p$ .

Given how I've described the case so far, Treat Yourself! implies that the mere fact that it seems to me that  $p$  provides me with prima facie justification for believing  $p$ . But Treat Yourself! also implies that, despite the fact that Bridget knows that it seems to me that  $p$ , the mere fact that it seems to me that  $p$  does not provide her with any prima facie justification for believing that  $p$ . Hence, according to Treat Yourself!, Bridget and I might be justified in having different doxastic attitudes on the basis of the same body of information. Hence, if Treat Yourself! is true, and I know it's true, the mere fact that I have a DPP with respect to  $p$  provides me with no reason to think that one of us have formed an inappropriate doxastic attitude, contrary to (1) of the Core Argument.

## 7. On Rejecting Premise (2): Demoting One's Peer

Recall

2. For any proposition  $p$ , if I know that I have a  $p$ -DPP, then I have no good reason to believe that it is my  $p$ -DPP, and not I, who formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude.

Premises along the lines of (2) are at the center of most of the literature on peer disagreement. For better or worse, there is now a mild consensus that the controversy over (2) hangs on the following question: can the very fact that *my DPP has the  $p$ -attitude she does* count as a reason for believing that it is her, and not I, who has formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude? That is, can I legitimately 'demote' someone from peer status on the mere basis of her opinion about the issue now under dispute? Some philosophers maintain that to do so would be to dismiss her in a 'blatantly question-begging' kind of way (Christensen [2011: 2]), others disagree (Thomas Kelly [2005]).

Consider the following kind of reasoning.

*Well, on the basis of our common body of information E, my DPP came to believe not- $p$ . But she ought not to have come to believe not- $p$ —on the basis of E, one ought to believe  $p$ . So she formed an inappropriate  $p$ -attitude.*

Call this 'the prima-facie question-begging reasoning'. Some philosophers maintain that, despite appearances, the prima-facie question-begging reasoning is perfectly legitimate (Kelly [2005]). As noted above, proponents of the Core Argument will be happy to grant that in many cases where the known existence of a DPP leaves one's belief unjustified, one was, prior to learning of the existence of a DPP, justified in believing as one did. Let's call this

**The Prior-Justification Assumption.** Prior to finding out that I have a DPP, I am justified in believing  $p$  on the basis of E.

Consider a case where this assumption holds, and when, upon finding out about the existence of a DPP, I engage in the prima-facie question-begging reasoning. While such reasoning will not be *dialectically* effective—that is, it won't persuade someone who doesn't already think that I am justified in believing  $p$ —it's hard to say what, from the perspective of rationality, is wrong with reasoning in this way. Given the Prior-Justification Assumption, I was justified in believing  $p$  on the basis of E prior to finding out about my DPP. And it is surely rational for me to reason on the basis of my justified beliefs. Thus, to simply assume that it is not rational for me to engage in the prima-facie question-begging reasoning is to simply assume that learning of the existence of a DPP has undermined my previously justified belief that  $p$ . But to simply assume *that* is to assume what the Core Argument is meant to show—namely, that the known existence of a DPP undermines previously justified belief. Hence, the argument now under consideration concludes, to reject to beg the question in favor of the conclusion of the Core Argument.

This is a powerful line of argument. Nevertheless, it faces a serious challenge. The trouble begins to emerge when we notice that the prima-facie question-begging argument doesn't actually rest on the assumption that  $p$ —rather, it rests on the assumption that *on the basis of E, one ought to believe  $p$* . The distinction is subtle but crucial. Given The Prior-Justification Assumption, prior to learning about my DPP, I am justified in believing  $p$ . But it doesn't follow from this that, prior to learning about my DPP, I am justified in believing that *on the basis of*

*E*, one ought to believe *p*. Thus, a proponent of the Core Argument can reject the prima-facie question-begging reasoning without simply assuming that the known existence of a DPP undermines my justified belief that *p*—she merely needs to assume that, after learning of the existence of my DPP, I am no longer justified in believing that *on the basis of E*, one ought to believe *p*. As I argue elsewhere (manuscript), it's plausible that a proponent of the Core Argument can make this assumption without begging the question in favor of the conclusion of the Core Argument, and without denying the Prior-Justification Assumption.

## 8. On Rejecting the Inference from (3) to (4): Level-Splitting

Recall

3. Thus, for any moral proposition *p*, if I know that I have a *p*-DPP, I should at least withhold from believing that my *p*-attitude is appropriate. (from 1,2)
4. Thus, for any moral proposition *p*, if I know that I have a *p*-DPP, then it is inappropriate for me to continue to hold my *p*-attitude. (from 3)

The inference from (3) to (4) rests on what Christensen (2013) calls a 'level-connecting' principle. Roughly, a level-connecting principle connects beliefs to beliefs about beliefs. A bit more precisely, a level-connecting principle connects facts about what it is *rational* to believe with facts about what it is *rational* to believe about what it is rational to believe—as we might say, it connects rational beliefs to rational beliefs about rational beliefs. For example, the claim that 'it is rational to believe that *p* only if it is rational to believe that it is rational to believe that *p*' is a level-connecting principle. More precisely still, a level-connecting principle connects rational doxastic attitudes to rational doxastic attitudes about rational doxastic attitudes. The specific level-connecting principle at work in the inference from (3) to (4) is

- 3.5. For any proposition *p*, if I should at least withhold from believing that my *p*-attitude is appropriate, then it is inappropriate for me to continue to hold my *p*-attitude.

To deny (3.5) is to maintain that it is sometimes appropriate to maintain one's doxastic attitude even when one ought to withhold from believing that one's doxastic attitude is appropriate. Since (3.5) is a level-connecting principle, we'll say that to deny (3.5) is to endorse *level-splitting*. To see what level-splitting amounts to, let's distinguish it from a couple of nearby theses, one stronger and one weaker.

Sophie Horowitz (2014) criticizes a thesis I'll call 'strong level-splitting', according to which it is sometimes appropriate to maintain one's doxastic attitude even when one ought to *believe* that one's doxastic attitude is *not* appropriate (cf. Maria Lasonen-Aarnio [2014]). To deny (3.5), however, is merely to claim that it is sometimes appropriate to maintain one's doxastic attitude even though one ought to be *agnostic* about the appropriateness of that attitude. It is also important to not confuse level-splitting with the weaker thesis famously advocated by William Alston (1980). According to Alston, it is sometimes appropriate to maintain one's doxastic attitude even when one ought to withhold from any particular belief about what *makes* one's doxastic attitude appropriate. Level-splitting thus goes beyond Alston's thesis to say that even if you ought to go as far as withholding from believing *that your doxastic attitude is appropriate*, your doxastic attitude might still be appropriate.

Where does this leave us? With work to do. While some authors have more or less explicitly rejected level-splitting, carefully distinguishing level-splitting from nearby theses (Feldman [2006] and Matheson [2009]), I know of none who has offered much by way of an *argument* either for or against level-splitting. The authors who have addressed the thesis have, rather, simply noted that level-splitting is fairly counterintuitive. This is not to say that these authors have failed us. But it is to say that there is here an area of research that remains to be explored.

## 9. Radical Moral Disagreement: Deep, Widespread, Extreme

Before closing, I want to briefly touch on what the conclusion of the Core Argument has to say about various types of ‘radical’ moral disagreement. There are at least three interestingly different types of radical moral disagreement to be considered, not all of which are always carefully distinguished in the literature on peer disagreement.

First, there is what I will call ‘deep moral disagreement’: here there is a moral disagreement between two parties over some particular moral issue—say, the permissibility of consuming factory-farmed meat—that is due to a deeper moral disagreement between them—say, over the moral standing of non-human animals. Second, there is what I will call ‘widespread moral disagreement’: here there is moral disagreement on *many* moral issues. Widespread moral disagreement may or may not be due to deep moral disagreement: you and your interlocutor might agree on all the more ‘fundamental moral issues’—say, the moral standing of non-human animals—but just so happen to disagree on lots of particular moral issues.

Two comments about widespread moral disagreement are in order. First, when widespread is *shallow*—that is, not deep—this doesn’t mean that the disagreement must be purely based on some non-moral disagreement: despite agreement on both the fundamental moral principles and the relevant non-moral facts, you and your interlocutor might simply disagree on how those moral principles *apply* to those non-moral facts. Second, widespread moral disagreement might exist either between you and another person—as when the two of you disagree on a lot of issues—or between you and a *group* of people—as when for most of your individual moral beliefs, there is someone in the group who rejects that moral belief. In the latter case, there may or may not be widespread disagreement between you and any one member of the group.

If the conclusion of the Core Argument applies to these kinds of disagreements, then these kinds of disagreements, should they exist, threaten us with radical moral skepticism—the thesis that few of our moral beliefs are justified—or even complete moral skepticism—the thesis that none of our moral beliefs is justified. But it is no simple matter to determine whether the conclusion of the Core Argument could apply to these kinds of moral disagreements. The crucial question is whether someone, or the members of some group, with whom you have such radical moral disagreement could possibly count as your ‘peers’ in the relevant sense (Elga 2007, McGrath 2007, Vavova 2014). In the context of the Core Argument, the main point of contention will be over whether such people could possibly satisfy condition (3B) of the definition of a DPP. This matter is delicate and complicated, and I won’t pursue it further here. Instead, I’ll use the remaining space to discuss a different type of radical moral disagreement—a type that has received relatively little attention in the literature on the epistemic significance of moral disagreement.

Suppose that I believe that consuming factory farmed-meat is wrong, and I come to find out that my friend, who I antecedently and justifiably believed was as likely as I was to have the correct moral view of the matter, believes not only that it is not wrong to consume factory farmed meat, but that, of the meats available for consumption, one is morally required to consume whatever meat was produced in the way that involved the *most suffering for animals*. As it happens, our moral disagreement is neither deep nor widespread: we agree on fundamental moral principles, and we agree about the vast majority of particular moral issues. On this one issue, however, our disagreement is *extreme*.

Is it possible that my friend is my DPP with respect to the proposition that it is wrong to consume factory-farmed meat? Recall condition (3B) of the definition of a DPP:

- (3B) Setting aside the reasons for which  $S_1$  formed her doxastic attitude with respect to  $p$ ,  $S_1$ ’s rational doxastic attitude towards the proposition that  $S_1$  has arrived at the appropriate doxastic attitude towards  $p$  on the basis of  $E$  is identical to  $S_1$ ’s rational doxastic attitude towards the proposition that  $S_2$  has arrived at the appropriate doxastic attitude towards  $p$  on the basis of  $E$ .

There’s a good case to be made that my friend and I could not satisfy condition (3B).

To see why, consider an analogy involving non-moral disagreement. Suppose that you are virtually certain that you are sober and that you are pretty good at mental math—when dividing triple-digit numbers by two, you get the right answer 99% of the time, a wrong but *nearby* answer 0.99% of the time, and a *way off* answer only 0.01% of the time. Your friend, however, is a real mathlete. When she’s sober, she gets the right answer 100% of the time. But when she’s drunk, she gets the right answer only 50% of the time, a wrong but *nearby* answer 40% of the time, and a *way off* answer 10% of the time. Moreover, you are only 98% certain that your friend is sober. Notice that your friend’s prowess at math, on the one hand, and the small chance that she is drunk, on the other, are in a certain sense offsetting, so that you are just as confident (i.e., 99%) that she will get the right answer when

dividing a triple-digit number by two as you are that you will get the right answer. Hence, (3B) of the definition is, for now, met.

Now suppose that you and your friend are asked to divide 324 by 2. You get 162, but your friend disagrees: she insists that the answer is 405. Here you are rationally certain (let's suppose) that you and your friend formed your judgments on the basis of the same body of information—condition (2B)—and yet you have opposed doxastic attitudes towards the proposition that 324 divided by 2 is 162—condition (1B). However, upon learning of your friend's view, you don't learn *just* that she has an opposing doxastic attitude with respect to the proposition that 324 divided by 2 is 162: you also learn that she *endorses* the answer 405. Thus, you learn that you and your friend have come up with wildly different answers. From this you conclude that at least one of you has come up with an answer that is *way off*. As Jennifer Lackey (2008) and David Christensen (2011) have pointed out, you can, without begging the question against your friend's answer, use this information to conclude that your friend has probably come up with the wrong answer. Given the facts of the case—i.e., that you are virtually certain that you are sober; that when you are sober, you get an answer that is way off only 0.01% of the time; that you are only 98% that your friend is sober; and that when your friend is drunk, she gets an answer that is way off 10% of the time—you can rationally conclude that if one of you has come up with an answer that is way off, it is most likely your friend, and not you. And you do this, moreover, while setting aside the reasons for which you believe that 324 divided by 2 is 162. What you rely on, instead, is (1) your antecedent information about you and your friend, and (2) the mere fact that you and your friend have come up *wildly different answers*. Hence, after you learn of your friend's view of the matter, she no longer satisfies condition (3B).

The case of my extreme disagreement with my friend over the moral permissibility of consuming factory-farmed meat might be analogous. While I have learned that my friend has an opposing doxastic attitude towards the proposition that it is wrong to consume factory-farmed meat, this is not all that I have learned: I have also learned that he believes that, of the meats available for consumption, one is morally required to consume whatever meat was produced in the way the involved the most suffering for animals. Going into this dispute, it may have been reasonable for me to have an attitude towards my friend analogous to the attitude that it was reasonable for you to have towards your friend in the math case: roughly, it may have been reasonable for me to believe that when my friend is cognitively well-functioning, he comes up with the right moral view more often than I do, but, because of certain personal information I have with respect to myself but lack with respect to my friend, I am rationally less certain that he is functioning well than I am that I am functioning well. Since these two factors might be offsetting, I might thus rationally have the same attitude towards the proposition that he will come up with the right answer that I have towards the proposition that I will come up with the right answer. And yet, since I rationally believe that if we come up with *extremely different* answers, it is more likely that my interlocutor is not functioning well than that I am not functioning well, I might rationally retain my moral belief in the face of extreme disagreement.

Some cases of extreme moral disagreement are thus cases where less would have been more—that is, in some cases of extreme moral disagreement, the disagreement has little or no undermining effect, because one can legitimately downgrade one's interlocutor partially on the basis of the very fact that the disagreement is extreme. Notice, moreover, that the degree to which one can downgrade one's interlocutor will depend, in part, on just how extreme one's moral disagreement is: the more extreme, the more likely it is that one of you is not cognitively functioning well, and thus, given that certain conditions are met, the more likely it is that your friend is not functioning well. In short, this suggests the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that, at least under certain conditions, there is an inverse relationship between how extreme a piece of moral disagreement is, on the one hand, and how epistemically significant it is, on the other. Katia Vavova (2014) argues for a similar point with respect to widespread and deep moral disagreement. However, Vavova's argument and the argument presented here proceed via different routes, and thus it's possible to endorse one while rejecting the other.

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## Biography

Dustin Locke is an associate professor of philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. He works primarily in epistemology, most recently authoring essays on moral epistemology and the relationship between rational belief and rational action.

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