How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?

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Abstract Moral disagreement is widely held to pose a threat for metaethical realism and objectivity. In this paper I attempt to understand how it is that moral disagreement is supposed to present a problem for metaethical realism. I do this by going through several distinct (though often related) arguments from disagreement, carefully distinguishing between them, and critically evaluating their merits. My conclusions are rather skeptical: Some of the arguments I discuss fail rather clearly. Others supply with a challenge to realism, but not one we have any reason to believe realism cannot address successfully. Others beg the question against the moral realist, and yet others raise serious objections to realism, but ones that—when carefully stated—can be seen not to be essentially related to moral disagreement. Arguments based on moral disagreement itself have almost no weight, I conclude, against moral realism.

Keywords The argument from relativity · Disagreement · Objectivity · Moral realism

Moral disagreement is widely held—in philosophical literature as well as in the general culture—to pose a threat for metaethical realism and objectivity,[1] yet it is surprisingly hard to find careful statements of arguments that start with moral disagreement and end with a conclusion that is in tension with realism. In this paper I attempt to understand how it is that moral disagreement is supposed to present a problem for metaethical realism. I do this by going through several distinct (though often related) arguments from disagreement, assessing their strength against realism.

    My conclusions are going to be somewhat skeptical. Some of the arguments from disagreement I discuss can, I think, be rather clearly dismissed. Others should be seen not so much as refutations of, but rather as challenges to, realism, and furthermore as

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[1] For a helpful survey, see Gowans (2000a).

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challenges that it does not seem like realists should have at all a hard time addressing. Some of the arguments from disagreement do, I think, pose a serious challenge to realism, but the phenomenon of moral disagreement plays a relatively minor role in them. Of course, there may be other ways—ways I do not consider below—in which disagreement is supposed to pose a problem for realism, but I cannot think of such ways, and so I tentatively conclude that moral disagreement is not the terrible problem (for metaethical realists) that it is often thought to be. I confess that there is something puzzling about this conclusion: If moral disagreement is not the enemy of metaethical realism it is often thought to be, why are thoughts to the contrary so widespread, even among good philosophers? Some of the popularity and apparent plausibility of the claim that disagreement counts against realism stems, I think, from conflating the different arguments to be considered below, equivocating between them.[2] And in what follows I hint at other possible explanations as well. Nevertheless, the popularity of the thought that moral disagreement undermines metaethical realism surprises me, and I do not have a fully satisfactory explanation of this fact.[3]

Before proceeding to discuss the arguments from disagreement, several preliminary points need to be made.

It is, of course, not at all clear—nor is it uncontroversial—how metaethical realism is best characterized. Fortunately, for the most part I can safely avoid such controversies here, as I am primarily interested in showing that disagreement does not undermine my favorite kind of realism, the realism I call "Robust Realism." Robust Realism—a view I characterize and argue for at length elsewhere[4]—is the view, somewhat roughly, that there are irreducibly ethical or moral truths, truths that are perfectly objective and that are not reducible to—not even identical with—natural, not-obviously-moral and not-obviously-normative truths. It is thus compatible neither with metaethical subjectivism or non-cognitivism (both of many different kinds) nor with naturalist versions of realism (views that take moral facts and properties to be respectable because they are really, at bottom, just good old natural facts). Notice that this kind of realism—sometimes labeled Platonism, Rational Intuitionism, Moorean Realism, or simply Non-naturalist Realism—is a realism of a fairly strong, uncompromising, kind, indeed probably no weaker a metaethical realism than any I know of in the contemporary literature.[5] Restricting the discussion to just this kind of metaethical realism cannot be objectionable, then: surely, moral disagreement is supposed to pose a problem at least for such strong versions of realism. If even Robust Realism is off the disagreement hook, so are probably most other versions of metaethical realism or objectivism. And most of the argumentative moves below will be as available to non-robust realists just as they are to robust realists (where they are not, I say so explicitly).

Notice that thus understood, realism is an existential, not a universal, thesis. It asserts that *there are* perfectly objective, irreducibly normative moral or ethical truths, not that *all* moral truths are of this nature. If there are some values, then, that are somehow available

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[2] Tersman (2006, p. xiii), also notes that many different arguments go by the name "the argument from disagreement."

[3] Nagel (1986, p. 147) expresses similar surprise.

[4] (Enoch 2003, 2007a). The view I argue for there is Robust *Metanormative* Realism, not Robust *Metaethical* Realism. So the discussion that follows has to be modified to apply to the view I argue for there. But the modifications needed are not, I think, problematic, and for simplicity here I restrict myself to moral disagreement as a problem for metaethical realism.

[5] With the possible exception of Oddie's (2005) realism, which is also committed to the causal efficacy of moral facts, a commitment I am rather agnostic about.

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only locally, in a culture-dependent way, this is not inconsistent with Robust Realism.[6] And this allows me to safely ignore, I think, the issue of Moral Particularism and related discussions of thick concepts.[7] I will focus, rather, on paradigmatically moral—and paradigmatically thin—judgments, such as judgments about wrongness or rightness of types of actions, or (moral) goodness or badness of states of affairs. What I will argue, then, is that disagreement about such judgments does not undermine realism (about them).

Let me restrict the topic I am about to discuss in three further ways. First, I will not be discussing relativism. Moral disagreement is often taken not just to undermine some version of metaethical realism, but also to support some version of metaethical relativism.[8] Whether it can do so is beyond the scope of my discussion here, though. Of course, if it can be shown that moral disagreement does not undermine a rather strong version of metaethical realism, this will have some bearing on the question of the support it may or may not lend to relativism. But in order to seriously discuss how it is that this bears on the question of relativism further issues will have to be addressed—a careful characterization of relativism is going to have to be provided and the relations between relativism and realism are going to have to be clarified—and doing that will take me too far from my primary interest here, namely, the relevance of moral disagreement to the plausibility of realism.

Second, though I will argue that moral disagreement is not the profound problem for realism it is commonly thought to be, I will not be arguing that moral disagreement is metaethically irrelevant. Moral philosophers agree—unanimously, I think—that *some* important lessons are to be learned from the phenomenon of moral disagreement. It is sometimes argued, for instance, that the phenomenology of moral disagreement actually lends some support to metaethical realism, for when disagreeing about moral matters the disagreement typically feels like a disagreement over an objective matter of fact. As a part of a very different project, disagreement may be thought to teach us valuable lessons on the nature of negation in moral contexts (Gibbard 2003, Chap. 4). Whether these and other arguments can be made to work is an important metaethical question, but not one I will discuss here. Here I restrict myself just to possible ways of seeing moral disagreement as undermining metaethical realism.

Third, I will not in what follows attempt to argue for realism. Rather, I will merely try to evaluate one family of objections to it. This means, first, that even if I succeed in establishing my conclusion realism may still be false, and indeed may fall prey to another objection. But this also means that in the context of my discussion what the antirealist must show is that disagreement poses a challenge to realism independently of any (other) antirealist assumptions or biases. The proponent of an antirealist argument from disagreement must show, in other words, that even if we start off as realists, or at the very least as agnostics, disagreement poses a challenge we need to address. As will become clear, some of the arguments from disagreement can be shown to rely on an antirealist premise, or at least on a premise that will not seem at all attractive unless one is already sympathetic to the antirealist cause. And perhaps, if one has other sufficient reasons to

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[6] Such values are discussed—in the context of a discussion of objectivity—in Raz (2001).

[7] Thick concepts are concepts that involve both normative and descriptive content (such as *courageous*, *kind* or *cruel*), and are contrasted with thin concepts whose content is arguably purely normative (such as *good*, *wrong*, and *ought*).

[8] Mackie's (1977, p. 36) badly misleading choice of a label for his version of an argument from disagreement—"the argument from relativity"—is an overly clear example. And this is a major theme, for instance, in Wong (1984).

reject realism, this need not be a flaw in general, but it is unacceptable in the context of my discussion here, namely in the context of evaluating just challenges *from disagreement* to realism.

One last preliminary: I suspect that the discussion below applies much more generally than merely to metaethical realism, or is at least easily so generalizable. Disagreement is thought to be a problem for realism in many other contexts as well, and there too it is not clear exactly how.[9] Nevertheless, in what follows I directly discuss only the metaethical context, leaving the generalization for another occasion. It is, however, important to note that sometimes arguments from disagreement are supposed to apply more forcefully against metaethical realism than against realisms in other domains, and in what follows I comment on which of the arguments considered satisfies this condition.

This paper is long because comprehensiveness is one of its aims—I discuss all versions of "the" argument from disagreement I am aware of. But comprehensiveness need not be one of the reader's aims. The reader should feel free, then, to read only those sections that deal with versions of the argument dear to his or her heart. The sections are ordered (roughly) in what seems to me an increasing level of sophistication, and are each sufficiently self-contained to allow for picking and choosing among them.

How, then, is moral disagreement supposed to undermine, or even challenge, realism?

1 From Tolerance (or the Rejection of Arrogance) to the Denial of Realism

Much of the reluctance to accept realism in the face of moral disagreement—though more in the general culture than in the philosophical literature—comes, I think, from an understandable aversion to arrogance and intolerance, especially when the disagreement is cross-cultural.[10] A proclamation by us Westerners of the deepest moral convictions in non-Western cultures as inferior to ours seems paradigmatically arrogant and intolerant, but exactly such a proclamation seems to be implied by a Westerner who accepts realism in the face of such cross-cultural disagreement while remaining committed to her Western values[11] (whatever exactly these are).

Yet it is hard to present a respectable argument that captures this intuitive thought (and to the best of my knowledge no philosopher presents such an argument). The following will certainly not do:

(1)   In cases of cross-cultural moral disagreement it will be intolerant or arrogant to claim that one of the parties to the disagreement (we, probably) is right and the other wrong.
(2)   We ought not to be intolerant or arrogant.
(3)   Therefore, in cases of cross-cultural moral disagreement we ought not to claim that one of the parties is right and the other wrong (From 1 and 2).
(4)   Therefore, in such cases it is not correct that one of them is right and the other wrong (From 3).
(5)   Therefore, in cases of cross-cultural moral disagreement there is no objective moral truth; metaethical realism is false (From 4).

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[9] For a discussion of disagreement in a more general context, see Bonjour (1998, pp. 138–142). For an attempt to marshal an argument from reasonable disagreement in the context of the ontological debate over abstract objects, see Rosen (2001, pp. 69–91).

[10] For a similar diagnosis, see Dworkin (1996, p. 92).

[11] Notice that no such proclamation is implied by realism alone, as one can be a realist without yet specifying what the moral truths are about which one is a realist.

There may be more than one flaw with this argument,[12] but the one that should be emphasized here is the conflation of theoretical and practical reasons. True, we ought not to be arrogant, and perhaps we ought to be tolerant as well (though it is not clear to me what exactly this requirement comes to and how if at all it can be justified). And such considerations may be of considerable practical significance: Perhaps, for instance, we should never *say* while engaging in an argument with someone from another culture: "Look, we are simply right and you are simply wrong!" Or perhaps—though I find this much less plausible—we should hide the truth of metaethical realism from the masses, because the average realist is much less tolerant than the average antirealist, or because realism leads (causally) to fanaticism. Even if this is so, still nothing follows about the truth of metaethical realism. The question we are interested in here is not whether moral disagreement gives (practical) reasons to do or avoid doing (or say or avoid saying) certain things, but whether it gives (epistemic, theoretical) reasons to believe that realism is false.[13] And it is hard to see how noting the practical significance of such virtues as tolerance and modesty can help in answering this question.[14]

In terms of the sketched argument above, the "ought" in 3 is crucially ambiguous. If understood as an epistemic ought, 4 may[15] follow from 3, but thus understood 3 does not follow from the obviously practical—indeed moral—2. In order to follow from 2 to 3 must be understood as involving a practical ought, but thus understood 3 does not support 4.

2 From Actual Disagreement, Deductively, to the Denial of Realism

The next argument, like the previous one, hardly ever comes up in serious philosophical texts, but very often in the classroom and elsewhere. This is the argument that seems to understand actual moral disagreement as entailing the denial of realism. Here is an instance of this argument:

(1) The ancient Greeks believed that slavery is morally permissible.
(2) We think that slavery is morally impermissible.
(3) Therefore, there is no objective truth of the matter with regard to the moral permissibility of slavery.

This kind of argument—often discussed and exposed for the fallacy that it is in introductory texts[16]—suffers from the problem (discussed in the next section) regarding

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[12] An often-made observation is that the conclusion 5 defeats at least one natural reading of premise 2.

[13] Perhaps there is a way of understanding the argument from tolerance as avoiding this problem. Perhaps, for instance, there is a *theoretical* virtue that is closely analogous to modesty, and perhaps it is arrogant in this theoretical sense to assume, for instance, that one is right and others—apparently just as intelligent and well-informed—are wrong. Thus understood, it seems to me the argument is really best seen as an argument from the possibility of rationally irresolvable disagreement. I discuss this argument below.

[14] It is perhaps worth emphasizing that our question is not at this point one of political philosophy: even if it is true, for instance, that government should be neutral as between competing conceptions of the good, such a claim remains entirely within the practical domain. If it has any bearing on the question of the truth of metaethical realism, this has to be shown. Rawls (1980, p. 542) seems to acknowledge this point, when—in spite of being very much concerned with (irresolvable) disagreement in the context of his political philosophy—he nevertheless explicitly denies that any skeptical or relativist conclusions about morality follow from such disagreement.

[15] "May" because the move from "We are justified in believing that p" to "p" is neither truth-preserving nor unproblematic.

[16] See, for instance, (Rachels 1999, Chap. 2).

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the need to distinguish a moral from a factual disagreement, but this is the least of its problems:[17] For the conclusion in no way follows from its premises. With only 1 and 2 as its premises, the argument supports at most (subject to the previous point) the conclusion that there is no truth about the moral permissibility of slavery *that is (and always was) universally accepted.* But from this, of course, nothing follows about realism. After all, it is quite possible—extremely plausible, I would say; but certainly possible—that slavery is and always has been objectively morally impermissible and the ancient Greeks (or those of them who did think that slavery was morally permissible) were simply morally mistaken on this matter.

The argument could gain deductive respectability if a further premise were introduced, claiming that neither we nor the ancient Greeks were mistaken about the moral permissibility of slavery. But it is hard to see why one should accept such a further premise—let alone its doubly universal generalization, namely that no one or no society is morally mistaken about anything—unless one is already a devoted antirealist of sorts[18] (and of a rather implausible sort at that). Without such a premise, then, the argument is clearly a non sequitur, and with it, it begs the question against the realist.

3 From Actual Disagreement and the Self-Evidence of Moral Principles, Deductively, to the Denial of Realism

Consider the following argument, which can naturally be seen as a completion of the previous one:

(1)   The ancient Greeks believed that slavery is morally permissible.
(2)   We think that slavery is morally impermissible.
(3)   According to realism, if there is an objective truth regarding the moral status of slavery, it is self-evident (or is easily deducible from self-evident moral principles).
(4)   Therefore, there is no objective truth of the matter with regard to the moral permissibility of slavery.

If moral truths are self-evident—if, that is, their truth is irresistible to any thinker who understands their meaning[19]—then real moral disagreement does seem impossible.[20] In particular, if the wrongness of slavery is self-evident or is easily deducible from self-evident moral principles, how is it possible that the Greeks failed to notice this fact? Thus, if realism is committed to the self-evidence of moral truths (or perhaps of some subgroup of them), then the argument above can be made respectable: Metaethical realism is committed to the self-evidence of moral truths (premise 3), and so to the impossibility of genuine moral disagreement; but such disagreement is actual (premises 1 and 2) and so possible; so realism is false.[21]

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[17] Another problem this argument faces is that it can be applied to just about any other discourse and so—for many metaethical antirealists—throws away the baby with the bathwater.

[18] Carson and Moser (2001, p. 4) suggest that the argument should be seen as an argument for relativism that *presupposes* the denial of realism.

[19] Both Shafer-Landau (2003, Chap. 11) and Stratton-Lake (2002) work with *much* weaker understandings of self-evidence, so nothing in the discussion that follows applies to self-evidence as they are using this term.

[20] Hume (1751, p. 98) seems to present a similar worry, stressing that (some) moral truths are so obvious, that disagreement about them seems to be ruled out by the belief in moral truths.

[21] For a closely related discussion, see Brandt (1944), though Brandt carefully restricts his discussion to versions of realism that are in fact committed to the self-evidence of ethical truth.

Why accept, though, premise 3? Why think that moral truths are self-evident or that realists should so believe? The thought is, I think, that the only moral epistemology compatible with realism has to invoke self-evident moral truths, or something close enough to them to render genuine disagreement impossible.[22] I return to epistemological worries about metaethical realism and to the relations between them and the phenomenon of disagreement below (in Sect. 10), so let me postpone discussion of this point until then, and just note here that it is premise 3 that realists must—and can, I think—reject. Such rejection is not, however, without cost, and I comment on the cost in Sect. 10.

4 From Actual Disagreement, by Inference to the Best Explanation, to the Denial of Realism

In philosophical discussions of moral disagreement and its relevance to the metaethical debate over realism disagreement is most often taken not as deductively entailing the denial of realism, but rather as putting to realists an explanatory challenge. The argument implicit in such suggestions is, I think, the following:

(1) There is deep, wide-ranging disagreement in moral matters (across cultures and historical eras, as well as within them).

(2) What best explains such disagreement is that moral opinions do not reflect (with different success) an objective, independent moral reality, but rather perspectives, cultures, ways of life, or something of the sort.

(3) Therefore, moral opinions do not reflect (with differing success) an objective, independent moral reality, but rather perspectives, cultures, ways of life, or something of the sort. (From 1 and 2, by inference to the best explanation.)[23]

Premise 1 is often thought to be (empirically) obvious, apparent to anyone without a realist axe to grind. And the intuitive thought behind premise 2 is that it is harder for the realist to explain moral disagreement than it is for those rejecting realism. Assuming some version of subjectivism, or relativism, or perhaps non-cognitivism, such wide-ranging disagreement is just what one would expect, but if there is an objective, universal, moral truth, why is it hidden from so many people in so many matters? It is hard to see, so the thought goes, how the realist can come up with a satisfactory answer to this question, and this, the intuitive thought concludes, is a powerful reason to reject realism.

This line of thought, like the more explicit argument attempting to capture it, arguably distinguishes in an intuitively plausible way between morality and other discourses, where disagreement seems much less serious of a worry for realism. This is so because of the apparent difference in the scope and nature of the disagreement in ethics on one side, and

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[22] Loeb (1998, p. 282) hints at this way of completing the argument from disagreement.

[23] I take this to be at least one plausible way of understanding Mackie's (1977) so-called argument from relativity. A similar argument pervades (Wong 1986), and Gowans (2000a, p. 4) presents a similar argument as *the* argument from disagreement. Shafer-Landau (2003, Chap. 9) understands the argument from disagreement as an explanatory one, but he combines the argument in the text here with the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement, discussed below. Some version of this argument was already put forward by Price (Schneewind 1998, p. 382). And at least at times Wiggins (1990, pp. 67, 75) seems to have a similar argument in mind (though at other times he seems to think of other arguments from disagreement, and it seems that he thinks of the most important problem disagreement poses ("the real challenge of relativity") as a challenge specifically to his subjectivism, not to the realism I discuss).

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(say) mathematics and physics on the other,[24] a difference which puts the metaethical realist in a tougher spot (compared to the mathematical or scientific realist) in terms of the explanatory challenges she must face.[25]

Notice, however, that it is not clear how exactly this line of thought can be made reasonably precise. The argument above, for instance, is in our context problematic first and foremost because its conclusion as it stands is consistent with metaethical realism. Realism, remember, is not an epistemological thesis—it makes claims about what truths there are, not about our relevant opinions or beliefs or judgments reflecting these truths. Faced with the above argument, then, the realist can retort: Very well then, perhaps our moral opinions do not reflect the objective moral reality. But this does not show that there is no such reality to be reflected. The argument, the realist may conclude, fails to engage her realism.[26]

But this would be too quick. If the best way out for the realist is to concede that moral beliefs—hers included, of course—do not reflect the moral facts, then she may perhaps have her realism, but only at the price of the most radical of skepticisms. A radically inaccessible realm of moral facts is, I think, a very small comfort for the realist. Such realism may, at most, serve as a last resort, but it is to be avoided if at all possible. Perhaps this is why metaethical realism and related theses are sometimes (including in the context of discussions of moral disagreement) understood as incorporating an epistemological requirement that the moral facts not be too radically inaccessible.[27] Let me postpone, then, discussion of the most general epistemological worries about realism until Sect. 10, and proceed here to see how the realist can avoid the conclusion 3.

The argument leading to 3 is an inference to the best explanation, and I can think of three general ways of rejecting such arguments:[28] One can deny the need to explain the relevant phenomenon, one can deny the existence of the relevant phenomenon, or one can come up with alternative explanations for the phenomenon. Let me discuss these strategies in turn.

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[24] As Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 220) notes, however, it is not at all clear whether this line of thought can distinguish between ethics and philosophy more generally (metaethics, of course, included) or economics. Also see Railton (1993, p. 283). I return to metaethical (as opposed to moral) disagreement and its significance in Sect. 11 below.

[25] A point emphasized by Shafer-Landau (2003, Chap. 9).

[26] For a related point, see Tersman (2006, p. 46). And for discussion, see Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, pp. 39–40).

[27] See Tolhurst (1987, pp. 610–611). And see also Thomson's (Harman and Thomson 1996, p. 68) characterization of the thesis of moral objectivity. There is another line of thought showing that 3 poses a serious threat for the realist: If our moral beliefs are radically disassociated from a supposed realm of moral facts, it becomes hard to see how our beliefs could be *about* these moral facts. Indeed, if moral beliefs systematically reflect ways of lives, or social conventions, or something of sort, is this not at least some strong reason to think that *this* is what they are about? This conclusion *is*, of course, inconsistent with realism. I return to these issues below, in Sect. 6.

[28] Assuming, that is, that in general IBE is a good rule of ampliative inference. This assumption is not uncontroversial. For the best-known critique, see Van Fraassen (1980, 1989). In the text I avoid this complication for four reasons: First, I believe that IBE is a good rule of inference (Enoch and Schechter 2008), but arguing the point will take me too far a field. Second, if the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement can be rejected because IBE is not a good rule of inference, this makes things easier, not harder, for the realist, so there is no dialectical flaw in assuming, in our context, that IBE is a good rule of inference. Third, I believe the argument can be rephrased without using IBE, instead using other inferential mechanisms allowed by critics of IBE (such as probabilistic reasoning). Doing so will require very minor changes in the argument and in the realist responses to it. And fourth, realists—or at least scientific realists—typically rely on IBE in arguing for their realism. So a realist who rejects IBE would be, at the very least, a dialectical oddity.

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4.1 Does Disagreement Call for Explanation?

Not every phenomenon calls for explanation—we are inclined to take some facts as brute, as things that just are the way they are, and that is an end to it. And IBE can only work as a rule of inference, it seems, when applied to phenomena that call for explanation.[29]

Does moral disagreement call for explanation? In order to present a full answer to this question, we would have to determine first what makes a phenomenon explanatorily interesting, what it is, in other words, that distinguishes between phenomena that do and those that do not call for explanation. And I am afraid I know of no satisfactory answer to this question. Let me settle, then, for the following very tentative point: Perhaps the realist is not entitled to just assume that disagreement does not call for explanation, but nor is the antirealist entitled to assume that it does. And the point can be made quite plausibly that given our cognitive shortcomings agreement rather than disagreement is what calls for explanation, that quite generally disagreement is what you should expect, and agreement the surprising exception that cannot be accepted as brute.

Perhaps this is not so, or perhaps both agreement and disagreement call for explanation,[30] or perhaps there is some other way in which it can be shown that disagreement calls for explanation. In what follows I do not rely on this possible way for the realist to reject the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement. But I nevertheless want to note that there is some unfinished business here for the antirealist if he is to employ this argument.

Now I agree that declaring all cases of moral disagreement as explanatorily uninteresting is a rather desperate (and dogmatic) move. But declaring *some* such cases as brute or explanatorily uninteresting seems not at all implausible. I return to this point shortly.

4.2 Denying Moral Disagreement

It is often noted that premise 1—that moral disagreement is widespread—is not in fact as obvious as some seem to think.

The by-now familiar line (on which I can thus afford to be quick) goes something like this:[31] Yes, there is widespread disagreement on specific moral judgments, but this disagreement need not be a genuinely *moral* disagreement, or even any disagreement at all. Perhaps, for instance, cross-cultural disagreements about the morally appropriate way of treating the dead (or their corpses) should be attributed to metaphysical disagreements about their fate after death rather than to genuinely moral disagreement—disagreement, that is, about fundamental or ultimate moral principles or values.[32] If this is so, there is a disagreement involved, but it is not a moral disagreement in the intended sense: It is not more of a moral disagreement than if you and I disagree about which switch to press

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[29] This way of putting things is not meant to exclude the possibility that we come to believe that a phenomenon calls for explanation by first coming across what seems to be a good explanation of it. Indeed—and I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion—we may view the sentence "It is a brute fact" as the limiting case of an explanation, an explanation it is sometimes justified to settle for. Then the point I am about to make in the text is that it is quite possible that this null-explanation *is* the best explanation in the case of moral disagreement.

[30] Williams (1985, pp. 132–133) suggests—after having noticed that disagreement need not be surprising—that in some contexts agreement calls for explanation and in others disagreement does.

[31] Writing thirty years ago, Mackie (1977, p. 37) already treated this line of thought as well-known.

[32] See, for instance, Rachels (1999, p. 23). For a critique of the empirical—anthropological and historical—evidence purportedly supporting the claim that there is widespread, genuinely moral disagreement see Moody-Adams (1997).

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simply because you think pressing the first one will save more lives and I think pressing the second one will (and both of us agree that we should save as many lives as possible). Or perhaps some apparently moral disagreements about the morally proper way of treating the elderly are best seen as the adaptation of the very same general moral principles to radically different circumstances.[33] In such a case there may be no genuine disagreement involved at all. In both kinds of cases the disagreement about specific moral judgments is attributable not to a genuinely moral disagreement—one stemming from disagreement about moral fundamentals—but to different factual beliefs (in the second case, both true because about different circumstances) that are relevant to the applications of the presumably agreed-upon moral principles. And disagreement of *this* kind clearly does not support antirealism.[34]

It cannot be denied, I think, that this line of thought demonstrates that there is less moral disagreement than may otherwise be thought. Surely, at least some disagreements in specific moral judgments are attributable to differences in (true or false, justified or unjustified) non-moral beliefs rather than to deep, genuinely moral disagreements. But like Mackie[35] I find it exceedingly hard to believe that this is the whole story of moral disagreement. It seems to me overwhelmingly unlikely that if we only get all our (non-moral) facts right (or even just uniformly wrong), all moral disagreement will disappear.[36] Just teach the Nazi about the physiology of pain and the psychology of humiliation, the thought seems to be, and that both apply to Jews as much as to Aryans, and he will become a member of the human rights community, or at least will acknowledge that he ought to become one; all we need is a better understanding of the biology of fetuses (and perhaps the metaphysics of the mind or the soul) and the moral status of abortions will become the subject of a happy consensus. These may be caricatures, but not, I think, unfair ones. And it seems to me overwhelmingly unlikely that anything like this is true. It is very hard, of course, to establish this empirically, because of difficulties in interpreting observed cases of moral disagreements and in deciding whether they are grounded in factual disagreements. Still, it seems to me the realist will be well advised not to let his realism hinge on as strong a claim as that all cases of moral disagreement are attributable to factual, non-moral disagreements.

4.3 Alternative Explanations

Assuming, then, that enough of the phenomenon of moral disagreement remains to be explained after differences in factual beliefs have been accounted for, is premise 2 true? Is it true that what best explains such disagreement that is genuinely moral is that moral judgments reflect not an independent moral reality but rather social conventions, ways of life, and the like?

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[33] Again see Rachels (1999, pp. 27–29).

[34] In the text I describe this line of thought as rejecting the phenomenon to be explained. But there is an alternative description: No one, it seems, denies that *superficially* moral disagreement, disagreement about specific moral judgments, is widespread. With *this* phenomenon as the explanandum, the thought in the text should be seen not as denying the phenomenon, but as suggesting an alternative explanation of the phenomenon—the claim is that what best explains superficially moral disagreement is not genuinely moral disagreement (and so not the denial of metaethical realism) but rather disagreement in factual beliefs.

[35] See Mackie (1977, pp. 37–38).

[36] For a similar point, see Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, p. 38).

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If the realist is to reject this as the best explanation, she must come up with better alternative explanations. And the striking fact about the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement is that such alternative explanations are so easy to come by:[37] Many moral matters are complex and not at all straightforward; people are the victims of any number of cognitive shortcomings (we are not all as intelligent as may be hoped, we do not reason carefully enough, we discount prior probabilities,...), and to different degrees, so that some may be more likely to make moral mistakes than others;[38] many find it hard—or do not want—to sympathize and imagine what it is like to occupy a different position in the relevant interaction, and different people are sensitive to the feelings of others to different degrees; we let our interests influence our beliefs (moral and otherwise), and given that our interests differ this accounts for differences in our beliefs (moral and otherwise); we are subject to the manipulation of others, and so to the distorting effects also of their self-interests; and perhaps there are cases of moral disagreement in which there really is no fact of the matter as to who is right, because the issue in dispute is just indeterminate.[39] These and many other facts[40] can help to explain moral disagreement consistently with meta-ethical realism.

Let me draw special attention to one of these kinds of alternative explanation: that in terms of the distorting effects of self-interest. This kind of explanation is especially

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[37] One can find such explanation already in Aquinas: see the excerpts from *Summa Theologiae* in Gowans (2000a, pp. 55–63). For contemporary discussions, see, for instance, Boyd (1988, pp. 212–213), Brink (1989, pp. 204–208), Hurley (1989, p. 292), Railton (1993, p. 283), Shafer-Landau (2003, Chap. 9). See also Darwall et al. (1992, p. 30; though they think these alternative explanations do not seem entirely satisfying); Wong (1984, pp. 117–120) also mentions many possible alternative explanations of disagreement, though he ultimately thinks that they do not suffice to explain at least some important cases of such disagreement.

[38] It sometimes seems as if proponents of the IBE argument from disagreement are reluctant, for one reason or another, to attribute moral errors on so many matters to so many thinkers, and that this is why they are reluctant to accept alternative, realist-friendly explanations of moral disagreement. As is perhaps clearest in Mackie (1977), however, they are rarely as reluctant to attribute wide-ranging *meta*ethical errors to many thinkers, and it is not at all clear what justifies this discrimination. For this point made as a criticism of Mackie, see Marmor (2001, p. 124). See also the discussion of higher-order arguments from disagreement in Sect. 11, below.

[39] Some writers (Shafer-Landau 1994) suggest that indeterminacy is the key to the explanation of moral disagreement. For relevant discussions see also Brink (1989, p. 202), Wiggins (1990, p. 77), Gert (2002, p. 298). But I am suspicious of such suggestions, for two related reasons: First, if it is genuinely indeterminate whether abortions are morally permissible then both Pro-Choice activists (believing abortions are determinately permissible) and Pro-Life activists (believing abortions are determinately impermissible) are morally mistaken. Instead of having to attribute mistake to one party to the debate, we now have to attribute a mistake to both. It is hard to see this as explanatory progress. Schiffer (2003, p. 259) notices that such indeterminacy will make both parties to the disagreement epistemically at fault, but he fails to notice that this undermines whatever motivation we may have had for the claim that there is no relevant epistemic difference between the disagreeing parties. But see Shafer-Landau (1994, p. 336) for an attempt to deal with this worry. Second, if indeterminacy is to play a key role in the explanation of moral disagreement, it follows that most cases of (genuinely) moral controversies—or the most important ones—must be indeterminate (for otherwise indeterminacy is not as central a factor in the explanation of disagreement as it is thought by some to be). And given the scope of (what seems to me like) genuine moral disagreement, this would leave very little—if anything—as determinate moral truths (or falsehoods). And this is certainly not a victory for the realist. [For instance, Schiffer's (2003, Chap. 6) version of antirealism asserts that there are no (or hardly any) determinate moral truths]. Thus, indeterminacy can perhaps play *some* role in accounting for moral disagreement, but not the key role some thinkers attribute to it.

[40] Perspectives, cultures, and ways of life—mentioned in the original IBE challenge to realism—can have a distorting effect similar—and not unrelated—to that of self-interest. So long as the distorting effect is not too strong, skepticism need not follow. And this means that explanations of the kind suggested in the text can capture much of the intuitive appeal of the original argument.

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important for at least two reasons: It is extremely powerful, and it helps explain the difference in the scope of disagreement in morality and in other discourses.[41] Consider the following example: Peter Singer and Peter Unger believe that we should give almost all our money to famine relief, that unless we do so we are morally corrupt, that our behavior is (almost) as morally objectionable as that of murderers (Singer 1972; Unger 1996). Perhaps they are wrong (though I do not know of any convincing argument to that effect). But even assuming they are right, there is no mystery about the common—almost universal—belief that morality does not require all that Singer and Unger believe it does. Acknowledging that they are right would exert a high price: it would involve exposing "our illusion of innocence,"[42] leading us either to give up almost all of our belongings or to the horrible acknowledgment that we are morally horrendous persons. Refusing to see the (purported) truth of Singer's and Unger's claims thus has tremendous psychological payoffs. Now, this is an extreme case, but it illustrates what is typical, I think, of many cases of moral debates—very much is at stake, and so false moral beliefs can rather easily be explained in terms of their psychological payoffs. And where mistakes can easily be explained, disagreement can easily be explained without resort to antirealism. Furthermore, given a standing interest in not revolutionizing one's way of life, in not coming to view oneself and one's loved ones as morally horrendous people, explanations in terms of the distorting effect of self-interest can explain the phenomenon Mackie was so impressed with—that our moral convictions seem to reflect our ways of life, and not the other way around.

Notice that moral beliefs are susceptible to such effects much more than many other discourses. In controversies over, say, the theoremhood of a mathematical conjecture, typically not much is at stake in terms of the interests of those taking part in the debate. Similarly for controversies about the nature of sub-particles. The effect of self-interest can thus serve to explain not just the scope of moral disagreement, but also the difference between the scope of moral and other disagreement (Nagel 1986, p. 148; Shafer-Landau 2006, p. 219). Sometimes interests *are* affected rather strongly by controversies in other areas as well. What then? Well, in such cases—where the promotion of mathematicians, the religious convictions and institutional interests of some Creationists, or, say, the economical interests of social classes are deeply affected by controversies in mathematics, physics and economics—in such cases we *do* see much more disagreement. And this is just as the explanation in terms of interests predicts. (Nagel 1986, p. 148; Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 219)

And notice also how powerful the explanation in terms of interests is. For given explanations in terms of the distorting effect of interests on moral beliefs, what would be really surprising is if we found moral disagreement *against* interests. What would be surprising, for instance, is if the South thought slavery was wrong and the North thought it morally unobjectionable, or if the rich believed in Socialism and the poor in Libertarianism (Tersman 2006, p. 27). But this is not typically the case. There is a striking correlation between the moral views people take on controversial moral matters

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[41] Brandt (1944, p. 487) quotes a passage from Thomas Reid (*Essays in the Intellectual Powers of Man*, s. VI, Chap. VIII), where Reid already notices this point. Brandt himself is critical of explaining moral mistake and disagreement by resorting to the distorting effect of interests, but only when such explanations are offered by someone claiming the self-evidence of ethical truth.

[42] This is the subtitle of Unger's book.

and the views that would—if realized—serve them better.[43] And what best explains *this* phenomenon? Surely, the distorting effect of interests on moral beliefs.[44]

These alternative explanations—those in terms of interests as well as others—are of course not full explanations. They are the mere sketches of explanations, the details of which to be completed by more detailed philosophical as well as empirical work. So this way of addressing the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement is importantly incomplete.[45] But, first, so is the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement itself, for in order to establish its second premise (that the denial of realism is the best explanation of moral disagreement), the proponent of that argument has to reject alternative explanations, those suggested here included.[46] And second, I hope enough has been said to make it at least a plausible hypothesis that moral disagreement or much of it can be explained by doing psychology, sociology and politics, not metaethics.

Let me mention just one more point here regarding competing explanations of moral disagreement. Competing explanations are evaluated holistically and against a background of prior beliefs. A theory that explains a certain phenomenon in terms of a kind of entity, for instance, is better as an explanation if we already had previous reason to believe in that kind of entity, one that does not depend on this very explanandum, and worse if the ontological commitment is a new one introduced by this very theory.[47] But this means that when the time comes to compare competing explanations of moral disagreements—some of them in terms of the denial of metaethical realism, others in terms compatible with realism—the result of the comparison is going to be heavily influenced by the beliefs we come to this task already equipped with. And this is true of our metaethical beliefs as well. So how good psychological explanations of disagreement are compared to metaethical, antirealist, ones will partly depend on whether we were metaethical realists to begin with, on what independent reasons—independent, that is, of this version of the argument from disagreement—we have for endorsing or for rejecting metaethical realism, and on how they interact. It follows that it is not just that whether we should accept metaethical realism depends (among other things) on what the best explanation of moral disagreement is. What the best explanation of moral disagreement is also depends (among other things) on

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[43] Is the correlation between people's moral views and *what they take to be* in their interest, or is it between their moral views and *what actually is* in their interest? What, for instance, if white Southerners thought slavery was in their interest, but in fact slavery was not in their interest, because (say) the availability of slaves gave a strong incentive not to modernize the South's agriculture? (I thank Shmuel Shilo for this suggestion.) It seems to me that some explanations can be in terms of objective interests, and some in terms of what people take to be in their interest. Explanations in terms of objective interests, though, incur a further liability—they have to supply with a mechanism through which the objective interest can have causal influence on the beliefs of those whose interest it is.

[44] This is compatible with the denial of realism. An antirealist of sorts can argue that yes, moral beliefs are partly shaped by interests, but so are moral truths (because they are constituted, say, by social conventions, themselves shaped by interests). Notice, then, that—as emphasized in the introduction—I do not take the relation between moral beliefs and interests to lend positive support to metaethical realism. The dialectical situation is different: The antirealist suggested disagreement as an *objection* to realism. So long as the realist can accommodate it—and even if so can the antirealist—the objection fails.

[45] Seeing that inferences to the best explanation do not purport to be deductively valid, the mere *possibility* of a better alternative explanation is never sufficient to reject them. What is needed is an *actually* better explanation, not just a possibly better one.

[46] Loeb (1998, pp. 289–292) notes that the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement is very much up for empirical grabs. See also Gowans (2000a, p. 11). And a similar claim is the main point in Gowans (2004).

[47] Ontological parsimony is often mentioned as one feature that makes one explanation better than another (Thagard 1978, pp. 76–92).

whether we should antecedently accept metaethical realism. And this limits the strength of the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement—standing alone—as an objection to metaethical realism (Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 219, 2006, p. 219). If there are reasonably strong arguments for realism, and no (other) reasonably strong objections to it, then this version of the argument from disagreement does not pose a serious threat to realism, because in such circumstances we are virtually guaranteed not to have any reason to accept antirealist explanations of moral disagreement as the best explanations. This does not mean, of course, that the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement has no force at all, or that it necessarily begs the question against the realist (failing, as it does, if we have strong antecedent reason to believe in realism). Where there are many considerations both for and against realism, this argument may enhance the plausibility of some and not of others, thus making a legitimate difference in the metaethical debate. And it may have some force on its own as well. But it should be remembered that this argument—all on its own—can have at most limited force against realism (and this even independently of the specifics of alternative explanations of the sort discussed above).

4.4 Conclusion

Let me sum up the discussion of the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement. The intuitive thought that the argument attempts to capture is that it is going to be exceedingly hard for the realist to explain—consistently with her realism and without falling into the most radical of skepticisms—the widespread moral disagreement we obviously encounter. I mentioned three possible lines of reply: I argued that it is not completely clear that all cases of moral disagreement call for explanation; that there may be less moral disagreement than there seems to be, but that it is highly implausible that there is none; and that there is no reason to expect that the realist is going to have a hard time explaining such disagreements in alternative ways, ones that are perfectly consistent with realism, perhaps most commonly by referring to the distorting effects interests have on moral beliefs. I want to conclude the discussion of this version of the argument from disagreement by making two further points.

First, the realist may of course combine some of these strategies to offer a complex reply to the argument. She may, for instance, argue that there is less moral disagreement than there seems to be, that much of what is left can easily be explained consistently with her realism, and that whatever disagreement—if any—remains unexplained does not in fact call for explanation. Some such combined strategy seems to me the most promising one for the realist to take.[48]

Second, the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement may be thought of as a particular instance of a family of IBE-arguments, each one beginning with a slightly different explanandum. The antirealist may argue that it is not moral disagreement itself that is best explained by the denial of realism, but rather its scope, or perhaps its intractability,[49] or the absence of a method to decide such disagreement (I consider this to be a

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[48] Gowans (2000a, p. 24) mentions that such a combined strategy may be possible, and Brink (1989, pp. 204–209)—I think—employs a version of some such combined strategy.

[49] Intractability may be understood in more than one way. It may be understood descriptively, as just noting that no party to the debate is likely to convince the other. This is the sense intended in the text. But it may be understood normatively, as applying to a disagreement when it is rationally irresolvable. I discuss this kind of intractability below, in Sect. 9. Gowans (2004, p. 143) suggests an argument from disagreement that is a version of the IBE argument, with the explanandum being apparently rationally irresolvable disagreement.

particularly important instance, and so I discuss it separately in Sect. 8), or the absence of a gradual elimination of such disagreement, or some such. For any such explanandum, the moves discussed in this section may be reemployed, but there is no guarantee that with the same success. Perhaps, for instance, moral disagreement does not itself call for explanation, but its intractability does. And perhaps denying the phenomenon of intractable moral disagreement is highly implausible, but denying the (perhaps slow) gradual elimination of disagreement is much more plausible. Most importantly, with each different explanandum, alternative explanations have to be reevaluated. It cannot be ruled out in advance, for instance, that though the best explanation of actual moral disagreement is in terms of the distorting effect of interests on our moral beliefs, a similar explanation is not satisfactory as an explanation of the absence of a method to decide controversial moral issues. Of course, I cannot hope to discuss all possible disagreement-related explananda here. Let me just say, then, that I see no reason to think that there is a version of this argument regarding which no combined strategy (of the kind mentioned in the previous paragraph) can work. If the antirealist thinks otherwise, let him fill in the details (what *exactly* is the relevant explanandum?) and argue his case.

5 Undermining the Support Agreement Would Have Lent to Realism

The next way of taking moral disagreement to undermine metaethical realism starts from an argument that proceeds in the opposite direction:

5.1 From Agreement, by Inference to the Best Explanation, to Realism

Consider, then, the following argument:

(1)   In many discourses there is wide-ranging agreement about the truths central to the relevant discourse.
(2)   What best explains such wide-ranging agreement is that there are objective truths the discourse answers to, truths on which opinions gradually converge.
(3)   Therefore, there are objective truths the relevant discourse answers to. (From 1 and 2, by inference to the best explanation)[50]

You may have doubts about this argument. For one thing, the argument might be stronger with a slightly different explanandum—perhaps, for instance, the phenomenon the explanation of which lends support to realism is not mere agreement, but agreement of a special kind; or perhaps it is not just agreement but the progress towards more and more agreement, the gradual elimination of disagreement; or perhaps what is crucial here is not so much agreement regarding specific judgments as it is agreement about methods, about what it would take to settle disagreements about judgments. Furthermore, you may doubt whether the conclusion really *is* what best explains the explanandum (whatever exactly it is).[51] But let me assume for the sake of argument that the argument from agreement to realism does have at least some force.

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[50]   A hint at this argument can be found in Gowans (2000a, p. 17).

[51]   Street (2003, Chap. 2), for instance, argues that much of the agreement we see on basic normative matters is more readily explained by evolutionary considerations than by the hypothesis that there are objective normative truths. Tersman (2006, p. 52) also mentions the possibility that agreement can be explained by things other than convergence on the truth.

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As it stands, the argument is an argument from agreement to realism, not from disagreement to the denial of realism. But there is in the vicinity an argument of this latter kind.

5.2 From Disagreement to the Denial of Realism

(4) We are justified in believing realism about a given discourse only if it can be supported by (an instance of) the argument from agreement to realism.
(5) There is no wide-ranging agreement in moral matters.
(6) Therefore, the argument from agreement to realism does not support metaethical realism (From 1 and 5).
(7) Therefore, we are not justified in believing metaethical realism (From 4 and 6).[52]

This argument too promises to distinguish between moral and other discourses, where realism is allegedly more plausible and disagreement allegedly less of a problem.

The argument is valid, and so if it is to be rejected at least one of its premises must be rejected. Some of the issues discussed in Sect. 4 above—in particular in Sect. 4.2—can be raised again, perhaps in order to doubt premise 5. Instead of returning to these matters, though, let me grant premise 5 for the sake of argument, and address the distinctive feature of this argument—premise 4. It is hard to see what could possibly support it.[53] Even accepting—for the sake of argument—a broad epistemology in which only explanatory need could justify a commitment to a realism about a discourse, still we have no reason to accept that agreement (or some fact about it) is the only phenomenon explanation of which can ground such a commitment. And furthermore, we have, I think, strong reason to reject such an epistemology in general, and with regard to metaethical realism in particular. Elsewhere (Enoch 2003, 2007a) I argue that our main reason to believe in metaethical or metanormative realism is not based on the role moral truths, facts and properties may have in explaining agreement (or, for that matter, any other phenomenon), but rather on the role they play in our deliberation about what to do. Even if such facts and properties are explanatorily dispensable, I argue, they are *deliberatively* indispensable—we cannot in good faith deliberate about what to do without believing in them—and there is no non-question-begging reason to take explanatory but not deliberative indispensability seriously. If such an argument can be made to work, it delivers—among other things—a refutation of premise 4, and with it a collapse of the argument based on it.[54]

Nevertheless, let me make here two related concessions. First, some metaethical realists seem to concede premise 4 or something very much like it. At least, one of the ways in which they argue for their realism is by employing the argument from agreement to realism.[55] As an ad

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[52] I think—but I am not sure—that something like this argument underlies Williams' (1985, Chap. 8) disanalogy between ethics and the empirical sciences. And Tersman (2006, pp. 46–47, 53, 104–105) argues, in different contexts, that perhaps disagreement can be taken not so much to refute realism as to undermine one major way of arguing for realism.

[53] For a related point, see Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 223).

[54] This may be one place where the argumentation is not straightforwardly generalizable to other, non-moral, discourses. The argument in the texts just referred to is specific to moral (or normative) discourse. Perhaps for other discourses explanatory indispensability *is* the only consideration that can justify a commitment to realism. If this is so—and I have yet to see an argument with this as its conclusion—then the point in the text does not carry over to other discourses.

[55] See Nagel (1986, pp. 145–149). Sturgeon (1992, p. 108)—a naturalist realist—also seems to rely on agreement in one of his attempts to support his realism. For a critical discussion of such arguments see Seabright (1988).

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hominem argument with these realists as the relevant homini, then, the argument above does have some force.

Second, even if premise 4 as it stands is false (or at least unsupported), still there may be in the vicinity here a problem—though a weaker one—for realists. For even if the argument from agreement to realism is just *one* way of lending support to realism, then the unavailability of this argument in the case of metaethical realism, though it neither refutes this view nor renders it philosophically unmotivated, still takes away from its plausibility. If, as seems likely, the metaethical realism-antirealism debate is going to be ultimately decided on grounds of plausibility, then realism is better off the more support it can mobilize. Realism would have been somewhat better off, then, had it been able to enlist to its cause also the argument from agreement to realism, and is thus somewhat worse off for not being able to do so.

These are significant concessions, and they do show a way in which moral disagreement may have some force against realism.[56] But if this is the best use antirealists can make of disagreement, then this is quite a disappointing result: For this is a way of taking moral disagreement to be not directly a problem for realism so much as a problem for one way (or family of ways) of arguing for realism, and as emphasized, there are other, much stronger, ones.

6 From Disagreement, via the Absence of Semantic Access, to the Denial of Realism

Imagine two communities, both of which seemingly speaking English, both seemingly engaging in moral discourse. And suppose that the moral standards common in each society are radically different from each other. But then, if the range of actions which are pronounced "wrong" by members of one society is radically different from the range of actions pronounced "wrong" by members of the other, why think that the two societies assign the same meaning to "wrong"? Why not believe, rather, that the two communities speak two different idiolects of English, with "wrong" meaning one thing in one, quite another in the other? And if the two communities' "wrong"s are not semantically equivalent—if they do not have the same meaning—then it is possible for a member of one society to say "Abortions are wrong," for a member of the other society to say "It is not the case that abortions are wrong," and for both of them to be right. And is this not inconsistent with metaethical realism?[57]

Much work needs to be done if this is to be made into a fully explicit objection to realism: It is necessary to distinguish between the claim that such different uses *give reason to believe* that the meanings of the relevant words are different in the two societies, and the more ambitious claim that they *make it the case* that the meanings are different;[58] it needs to be shown why the problem is a problem for realism in general rather than just for contemporary versions of naturalist realism, which make themselves especially vulnerable to such problems because of the semantic theory they typically endorse;[59] and the point has

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[56] To repeat, the realist still has available to her the move of rejecting premise 5.

[57] As it stands the objection is constrained in scope to just inter-social or inter-cultural disagreement. It may be possible to apply a similar line of thought also to intra-social disagreement, but doing this will complicate matters because of the need to take into account also the social aspect of meaning, division of linguistic labor, and so on.

[58] Tersman's (2006) discussion is—following Davidson in this respect—not sensitive to this distinction.

[59] For powerful presentations of this and related objections to naturalist realism, see Horgan and Timmons (1991), Loeb (1998). For an attempt at a reply, see Brink (2001). Tersman (2006, p. 85) claims that his related points apply to non-naturalist as well as naturalist realist views. But it seems to me that Tersman's characterization of realism—and in particular, his emphasis on the continuity of moral and natural facts (2006, e.g. 98)—in fact shows otherwise.

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to be argued that the conclusion of this semantic argument really is incompatible with metaethical realism or its underlying philosophical motivations: Why, in other words, cannot the realist happily concede that "wrong" has different meanings in the two communities' languages, but insist that abortions are universally, objectively, wrong? Of course, perhaps this is not best translated as "Abortions are wrong" to languages of other communities, but so what?[60]

These are all interesting and important matters which I cannot hope to engage in satisfactorily here. Instead of trying to do that, then, let me make the following point: True, metaethical realists have to come up with a semantic theory for moral language, one that will explain how it is that moral words gain their meaning, what if anything they refer to, what it is—if anything—in virtue of which the word "wrong" refers to the (objective, perhaps abstract) property *wrongness* rather than to other properties or to nothing at all, and so on. This is indeed a challenge realists must face, and it should not be underestimated. And the argument above seems to highlight the need to address this challenge. But notice that with the challenge understood as the general one of coming up with a satisfactory semantic theory for moral language, moral disagreement no longer has the central role it is presumably supposed (by proponents of arguments from disagreement) to have as a problem for moral realism. The challenge of accounting for the semantic access to moral properties realistically understood is thus a genuine one, but it has nothing essentially to do, I conclude, with moral disagreement.[61]

Nevertheless, a concession. The semantic challenge to realism is, as just noted, a general one, and it has nothing to do with disagreement. But the phenomenon of moral disagreement may serve to set adequacy constraints on a way of addressing this challenge. Perhaps, for instance, some attempts at a semantic theory consistent with realism yield the result that the two communities from a few paragraphs back are talking past each other, and perhaps this result is unacceptable. If so, an understanding of this disagreement refutes the suggested semantic theory.[62] So if a realist view responds to the semantic challenge (or any other challenge, for that matter) in a way that commits it to some problematic claims about (for instance) the scope and persistence of moral disagreement, this may render the view vulnerable to relevant arguments from disagreement.[63] Moral disagreement, then, may very well be metaethically relevant here, but only to the extent that it sets adequacy constraints on solutions to the more general problem of coming up with a semantic theory consistent with realism.

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[60] At times, Tersman's (2006, e.g. 130) characterization of realism seems to understand it as inconsistent with such a reply. But it is not clear to me why this should be so.

[61] For a similar point, see Tersman (2006, p. 131). For an attempt at a semantic theory congenial to Robust Realism, see Wedgwood (2001, 2007). Tersman (2006, p. 98) criticizes Wedgewood's theory, but—for reasons I cannot elaborate on here—his criticism seems to me to miss its mark.

[62] This is the gist of much of Tersman's (2006, Chapter 5) argumentation (though he thinks that such reasoning does not refute realism—it merely serves to undermine the support realism could have mobilized from the objective feel of moral disagreement; Ibid., 104–105). Tersman thinks that just about any semantic theory consistent with realism (and indeed cognitivism) falls prey to this objection, which he calls "the argument from ambiguity." At least with regard to Wedgewood's suggestion, though, I remain unconvinced.

[63] This is the case, it seems to me, with regard to the metaethical theories of Boyd, Sturgeon and (in a different way) Michael Smith. For a criticism along these lines of Boyd's and Sturgeon's optimism regarding the nature of moral disagreement, see Tersman (2006, pp. 99–100) and the references there. For a criticism of Smith's optimism regarding the convergence in desires of all rational creatures, see Enoch (2007b). And see also Smith's reply (Smith 2007).

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7 From Disagreement, via Internalism, to the Denial of Realism

Assume that someone morally ought to Φ only if they are, or under suitable conditions would be, motivated to Φ,[64] and call this assumption "Internalism."[65] Assume further that agents' motivations (or motivational sets)[66] diverge fairly radically, so that there is no type of action that all are, or under suitable conditions would be, motivated to perform. It then follows that there is no moral ought-judgment that is true of everyone. And this means, it seems, that metaethical realism is false. This line of thought—associated perhaps most clearly with Gilbert Harman's case for relativism (Harman 1984)[67]—starts from a claim about disagreement *in motivation*, and proceeds to conclude that metaethical realism is false. Granted, it may be a bit of a stretch to call such divergence in motivations disagreement, but it does seem to qualify as disagreement in a naturally generalizable sense, sufficiently so in order to justify discussing it here.

The argument above is deductively valid, so only two realist strategies are available here: Rejecting Internalism, or arguing that agents' motivations are not in fact radically diverse (or, of course, both).

Notice that a mere empirical finding according to which the motivational sets of all humans share certain features would not be enough. The blow for realism, it seems, would be just as serious if the argument were to be reformulated in terms of *possible* agents to whom the relevant moral judgments do not apply. So if the argument is to be rejected without rejecting internalism, it must be argued that some motivations are *necessarily* found in all agents, that, in other words, some motivations are constitutive of agency. And some thinkers have indeed taken this line.[68] Now, for reasons that I cannot discuss here I find the attempt to ground normativity in what is constitutive of agency unconvincing, and indeed inconsistent with metaethical realism and the philosophical motivations underlying it (Enoch 2006). Let me proceed, then, to discuss the internalist premise.

Now, I think that this internalist premise is rather clearly false, and that it entails even more clearly false propositions [like Harman's (1977, p. 107) famous claim that it is not true to say of Hitler that he ought not to have done what he did]. But in our context there is not even a need to establish this claim. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that unless one is already highly suspicious of metaethical realism one has no reason to accept the

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[64] Naturally, much depends on just what "suitable conditions" are. And there is some reason to think that there is no acceptable way of filling in this blank. For a related objection to views of normativity that make use of ideal or hypothetical responses, see Enoch (2005).

[65] The literature distinguishes between many different kinds of internalism. The one in the text is the one Darwall (1983) calls existence-internalism (distinguished from judgment-internalism). As I will not in this paper discuss other internalist theses, in the text I just use "Internalism."

[66] This is a term Williams (1980) made famous.

[67] The distinction is sometimes drawn between agent- and speaker- or appraiser-relativism (Sturgeon 1994). In these terms, the relativism that the line of thought in the text seems to support is agent-relativism— relativity in the applicability of moral judgments to the actions of different agents (rather than relativity in the truth-values of a moral statement uttered by different speakers). This distinction mirrors the distinction between existence- and judgment-internalism.

[68] Velleman's (1996) discussion of what may be called quasi-externalism—giving the externalist all she wants consistently with internalism—is the most explicit discussion I know of that fits the pattern in the text. For the attempt to find motivations that are constitutive of agency (motivated also by considerations different than the one in the text), see Korsgaard (2002), Rosati (2003).

internalist premise.[69] So assuming internalism would be begging the question against the realist. What is really needed if there is going to be an argument here against realism is *an argument* for this internalist premise. And this means, first, that the argument as presented is importantly—indeed, crucially—incomplete, and second, that the premise about disagreement (in motivations) has no part to play in the real work that needs to be done, that of establishing the internalist premise.

Perhaps realism is after all false, and perhaps—though this seems even less plausible to me—this kind of internalism is true. But the argument here does not show how disagreement plays a role in the rejection of realism, because by the time it gets to the disagreement premise the realist game is already over. This argument too, then, does not show how disagreement itself is a problem for metaethical realism.

8 From the Absence of a Method, Deductively or by Inference to the Best Explanation, to the Denial of Realism

The thought is sometimes expressed that the problem with moral disagreement is not the disagreement itself, but rather that it seems not to be resolvable in anything like the ways scientific or other disagreement often is. In this section I start my attempt to understand this thought, an attempt I continue to pursue in the next two sections.

When two physicists disagree—sometimes rather strongly—about the truth (or acceptability) of a scientific theory, they typically agree at least about what would settle their disagreement. They agree, for instance, that if so-and-so an experiment were to yield this-and-that result, or if some observation were to reveal certain data, this would settle the controversy, and they agree how such further evidence would settle it. So although there is often disagreement in physics it is somewhat superficial, and underneath it lies a deeper agreement, if not about the truth of theories, at least about what findings support what theories and (roughly) to what extent. But it is exactly this feature, the thought goes, that is missing in cases of moral disagreement. Moral disagreement runs much deeper than disagreement in the sciences, because typically, or at least often, in cases of moral disagreement there is no deeper agreement underlying it, no agreement about how to settle the more superficial disagreement. And it is this fact—not merely the disagreement itself—that is supposed both to pose a problem for the metaethical realist and to distinguish between morality and discourses about which realism is presumably more natural a view. So the general form of the argument looks something like:

(1)   There is no method for deciding cases of moral disagreement.
(2)   Therefore, at least in cases of moral disagreement, there is no objective moral truth.[70]

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[69] A reminder—the text addresses only the kind of internalism defined earlier. Nothing I say here commits me to the inconsistency of realism with other, more plausible, internalist theses. Tersman (2006, Chap. 6) attempts an argument against realism that starts with an exceptionally weak version of (judgment-) internalism. But, first, I am not sure this weak version is really all his argument needs, and second, his argument is not an argument from disagreement at all, as he himself seems to concede when putting the general idea as follows: "cognitivism is implausible since it allows for a community of amoralists" (Tersman 2006, p. 120, footnote 21; and see also p. 131).

[70] A version of this argument can be found already in Ayer (1936, p. 106). For a fairly explicit contemporary discussion of this argument see Sturgeon (1984, p. 49) (though he also presents the IBE version of the argument from disagreement), and Sturgeon (2006, p. 107). In general, and for reasons to be discussed below, often writers put forward the IBE version of the argument from disagreement together with some version of the argument from the absence of method. This, I think, is the case with Mackie (1977).

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Notice that the conclusion is rather limited in scope. Some versions of the argument from disagreement—most notably the IBE-version discussed in Sect. 4—hope to support a conclusion about morality as a whole, not just about those parts of morality that are controversial. This argument has no such aspiration (nor can it be modified so as to have such an ambition without losing whatever plausibility the move from 1 to 2 may have). But let me assume, for the sake of argument, that just about any moral claim (or at least any interesting moral claim) is controversial, so that we can safely ignore the restriction on the scope of the conclusion.

As it stands, though, the argument is clear neither on how the conclusion follows from the premise, nor on what the premise exactly means. Let me discuss these points in turn.

Premise 2 does not follow deductively from 1. What would be needed for the argument to regain respectability is a further premise to the extent, roughly, that objective moral truth (or perhaps objective truth more generally) is necessarily decidable, that there can be no (moral) truth at which we have no method of arriving. But I see no reason why anyone should accept such a verificationist premise in general,[71] and I see no reason why anyone should accept it about morality unless they are already prepared—for independent reasons, presumably—to reject metaethical realism.[72] This, however, is a controversial point even among philosophers sympathetic to realism (Bond 1983, p. 65; Nagel 1986, p. 139; Kim 1998, pp. 78–81; Dancy 2000, pp. 57–59, 65–5),[73] and so I will place most of the weight of the rejection of this argument on the discussion of premise 1, to which I get shortly.

Let me just add here that even if 2 does not follow from 1 deductively, it may follow from it by IBE. For it may be argued that the unique feature of moral disagreement that realists cannot explain is the fact that it goes all the way down, that there is no agreement on method underlying specific disagreements. Now, I will not again discuss the three general ways of rejecting an inference to the best explanation. Rather, I want to argue that depending on how premise 1 is to be understood, it can either be safely denied or satisfactorily explained in a realist-friendly way, and that the argument from absence of method thus does not pose a serious threat to metaethical realism.

What is meant, then, by the claim that there is no method to decide cases of moral disagreement? It seems to me four different thoughts may be—and often are—expressed by such claims. The point may be, first, that we just have no method of proceeding in cases of moral disagreement, that facing disagreement we are, as it were, at a loss for words, knowing not what we can possibly say or do next; or second, that though we do proceed in any number of ways, none of them is justified; or third, that there is no method that is guaranteed to lead to agreement, to make at least one party to the debate see her or his error; or fourth, that there is no method of settling the disagreement that is itself accepted as the proper method by all parties to the original disagreement.

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[71] For a related point, see Chang (1997, p. 21).

[72] There may be *some* moral truths for which the transition from 1 to 2 can be made plausible without begging the question against the realist. Perhaps, for instance, subjective-ought-statements (that is, roughly, statements about what you should do given what you know) are necessarily knowable. But even if this is so, I see no reason to think that *all* moral truths are necessarily knowable, and it is this universal generalization that is needed if the argument is to pose a problem for realism.

[73] See in this context Tersman's (2006, p. 70) useful distinction between different kinds of inaccessibility, and its relevance to the point in the text.

8.1 Literally No Method

It would perhaps be alarming for metaethical realism if in the face of moral disagree-ment—which is, we may assume, widespread—we just did not have a clue how to proceed (though it is not completely clear what would follow from this; in particular, it is not clear that such a hypothetical is more friendly to alternative, antirealist metaethical positions). But this is nothing to worry about, because thus understood premise 1 is clearly false.

We do proceed in any number of ways both in conversation and deliberation, and in action, even facing moral disagreement. We try to reason, to convince, to draw analogies and make comparisons, to reduce ad absurdum, to draw conceptual distinctions, to imagine what it would be like to be on the other side, to engage each others' emotions and desires, to rely on authority, and so on. Perhaps we are mistaken in employing such methods, or perhaps there are too many methods and none enjoys a consensus about its status. I proceed to discuss these possibilities in the next subsections. But it cannot seriously be suggested that we literally have no method of proceeding in moral thought and action once faced with moral disagreement.[74]

So charity requires that we not read premise 1 literally. How else can it be read?

8.2 No Justified Method

Perhaps the point is, then, that facing moral disagreement we have no *justified* method of proceeding, and that this fact entails, or is best explained by, the denial of metaethical realism.

Now if moral disagreement is widespread, and if it undermines the justification of moral beliefs (because facing moral disagreement we have no justified method of proceeding to form or revise our moral beliefs), this is indeed a troubling result (though it does not entail antirealism; rather, it raises the stakes by allowing the realist to maintain her realism only at the price of a rather extreme skepticism). But as a premise in an argument against realism, the denial of a justified method in the face of disagreement will just not do. Why should we accept it, unless we already lean rather heavily in antirealist directions? Perhaps some argument can be given, but then it will be this other argument—the one supporting premise 1—that does the real work. So the argument from the absence of a justified method cannot stand as an objection to metaethical realism unless it stands on the shoulders of another objection to that view, and so it can be safely set aside here.

But perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps the worry underlying the thought that dis-agreement somehow undermines justification is really best seen as a general worry about epistemological access, a worry to which metaethical realism is purportedly especially vulnerable. This may be so. I discuss this worry in Sect. 10, below.

8.3 No Method Guaranteed to Convince

Getting closer to the intuition I started this section with—that in other discourses disagreement typically rests on a deeper agreement, but not so in morality—the thought

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[74] If one wants, one may earn respectability for the claim that there is no method in such cases by introducing a tendentious definition of "method," one that rules out methods that are not unified enough, or that the status of which is not in consensus, or something of the sort. But such redefinition—here as elsewhere—achieves nothing. Thus understood, premise 1 may be true, but it becomes much harder to justify the transition from it to the conclusion 2.

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may be that in physics, for instance, the scientific method is (perhaps eventually) guaranteed to generate convergence, indeed consensus; that there are at least possible results of possible experiments that are guaranteed to convince the erring party that she was indeed mistaken. But this does not seem to be the case with moral disagreements. True, we have methods of proceeding in cases of disagreement, and perhaps even some of them are justified. But justified or not, they do not succeed in generating agreement.[75] And it is this feature of moral discourse that either entails or is best explained by the denial of metaethical realism.

Here again, one may deny that this is indeed a feature of moral discourse. It may be argued that some method—perhaps some version of the method often referred to as Reflective Equilibrium—is guaranteed to generate (perhaps eventually) agreement, or at least that the claim that this is not the case needs to be argued for. But here again, this is not the way I will go. Yes, some disagreement may very well disappear if methods such as Reflective Equilibrium were to be carefully employed, but I find it highly implausible that all disagreement will disappear in this way. I tend to agree that moral disagreement goes—in this way too—all the way down.

Thus understood, then, I accept the premise. But thus understood, it is very hard to see how it can support the conclusion. Certainly, the absence of a method guaranteed to eliminate disagreement does not deductively entail the denial of realism. To do that we would need to add another premise, to the effect that though they may be morally mistaken, people cannot be *too* mistaken, they cannot be such as to resist the moral truth when presented to them via a justified method. But I see no reason to accept this further premise, at least not unless one is already committed to the denial of realism. Neither is the absence of guaranteed dialectical success best explained by the denial of realism. The morally mistaken may be unconvinced by justified methods for any number of reasons—they may be too stupid, or may have epistemological beliefs (about which methods justify which beliefs) that are too crazy, or may not be willing to listen open-mindedly, or may again be subject to the distorting effects of interests—all of which perfectly compatible with realism.

The absence of guaranteed dialectical success does not, then, support the denial of metaethical realism.

8.4 No Agreed Method

The intuitive thought about what distinguishes disagreement in morality from disagreement in, say, physics, seems to support another reading of the argument from the absence of a method. For in physics not only is there a justified method of settling disagreements, but also this method is universally accepted by physicists. And it is exactly this feature that is absent in moral disagreements, and that suggests that metaethical realism is false.[76]

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[75] One method of achieving agreement on moral matters is to eliminate those who disagree with you. Despite its historical credentials, it is not the kind of method intended in the text.

[76] See, for instance Waldron (1992, pp. 158–187) (though at times Waldron seems to think of the argument from the absence of a justified method).

Again, let me accept that there is no agreed method of settling moral disagreement,[77] though I should say that I have doubts with regard to the availability of such a method in physics or anywhere else.[78] But how is this fact supposed to support the denial of realism?

In an important sense, we are back at step one. For in this paper we are looking for a way in which disagreement supports the denial of realism. And now we have in front of us an argument that *presupposes* that disagreement (about a method, this time) counts heavily against realism. But surely, this is not something the antirealist is entitled to take for granted in the context of an honest attempt to find out whether and how disagreement is a problem for realism. So the situation seems to be this: If there is some other way of showing that disagreement is a serious problem for realism then the argument from the absence of agreed method can perhaps have some force, parasitically, as it were, on the force of that other argument. And if there is no other version of an argument from disagreement that can be made to work, then neither can this one (because it has no way of supporting the move from disagreement on method to the denial of realism). And this means that we can safely set aside the argument from absence of agreed method, and just proceed to discuss all other versions of the argument from disagreement. The argument from absence of agreed method poses no independent threat for the realist.[79]

Strictly speaking, this result needs to be qualified.[80] For this paper's project has largely been that of evaluating arguments that start with disagreement *about moral judgments* and conclude with an antirealist view *about those judgments* (and judgments like them). In these cases, then, the disagreement and the antirealist position are about the very same subject matter. But here we are considering not the claim that a disagreement about the justified methods entails antirealism about statements such as "the method of reflective equilibrium is justified," but rather that it entails antirealism about first-order moral judgments. The claim here, in other words, is that a disagreement about one thing supports antirealism about another. And it is in principle possible for the proponent of such an argument to insist that this is a difference that makes an argumentative difference, or indeed that for some other reason the case of disagreement about method is unique, importantly different from that of disagreement about specific moral judgments. I confess not to have a knock-down argument against such a move before seeing it. Nevertheless, it is not premature, I think, to conclude that unless the details of such an argumentative move can be filled in a plausible (and non-question-begging) way, a plausible argument from the absence of an agreed method has not yet been presented. And given the results in the rest of this paper, nor is it premature, I think, to conclude that no such argument is likely to succeed.

I conclude, then, that the argument from the absence of method—however exactly it is understood—fails as an objection to realism. But perhaps none of the suggestions above is

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[77] What is meant here by "settling" is, roughly, finding out who is right and who is wrong, or who is justified and who is unjustified. Whether or not there is agreement about how to proceed practically when facing a moral disagreement (say, by a majority vote) is beside the point here.

[78] Some Creationists, for instance, do not accept the scientific method. Of course, they are not often thought of as physicists. But utilizing this fact to save the purported disanalogy between physics and morality here would be cheating. One can always guarantee agreement on method by restricting the group of those who count (physicists, say) to just those who already agree on the relevant method. For an attempt to defend the analogy between disagreement in ethics and in the natural sciences (partly) by noting this point, see Sturgeon (2006, p. 108).

[79] None of this means that disagreement about methods of settling moral disagreements is irrelevant to the metaethical debate. In particular, it may have the role mentioned in Sect. 4.4, that of a further explanandum.

[80] I thank an anonymous referee for making me see this.

the best understanding of the thought that the argument from the absence of method attempts to capture. Perhaps the worry is not just that no method is guaranteed to convince everyone or to itself enjoy consensus, but rather that no method is guaranteed to convince—or enjoy consensus among—even all those who are perfectly rational. Indeed, perhaps the real worry is that moral disagreement itself persists even among the rational. It is to discussing this worry that I now turn.

9 From Possible Rationally Irresolvable Disagreement, Deductively or by Inference to the Best Explanation, to the Denial of Realism

Perhaps the troubling worry about moral disagreement comes not merely from its being so widespread or from its persistence, but from the (apparent) fact that it persists even among rational, reasonable, sensible people. If someone refuses to take evidence into account, or refuses to eliminate inconsistencies in his beliefs (moral and otherwise), or refuses to acknowledge that others too have interests, or refuses both to take analogies seriously and to offer relevant disanalogies, and so on, then perhaps a persistent moral disagreement with him is not so much of a problem for the metaethical realist. After all, what reason do we have to expect *this* guy to see the moral truth? The situation is much more problematic, so the thought goes, when moral disagreement persists with perfectly sensible people on both sides. It is this kind of disagreement that is deeply surprising, indeed perhaps inconsistent with or at least not plausibly explained consistently with metaethical realism. The thought seems to be captured by the following argument:

(1) There are possible cases of rationally irresolvable moral disagreement, where both parties are equally rational, guilty of no flaw of reasoning or some such.

(2) Therefore, at least in cases where such disagreement is possible, there is no objective fact of the matter.[81]

Notice that unlike previous arguments, this one starts not with actual but rather with possible disagreement. If rationally irresolvable, no-fault disagreement is possible, but just happens not to be actual, this may make things politically simpler, but it does not seem to alleviate whatever worry about realism rationally irresolvable disagreement gives rise to. And the fact that the argument starts from possible and not actual disagreement has immediate effects on both its generalizability and its vulnerabilities. For it applies even to discourses that do not exemplify wide-ranging no-fault disagreements, so long as it is possible for them to do so.[82] And the argument is not vulnerable to the worries (mentioned in Sect. 4.2 above) about whether actual moral disagreement should best be seen as genuinely moral or rather as stemming from differences in non-moral beliefs. This does not mean that actual moral disagreement is irrelevant to the assessment of this argument. Indeed, beliefs about actual moral disagreement and its nature may be used to support premise 1 (a point I return to below). But though actual disagreement may very well be relevant in this indirect way, it is not strictly speaking assumed or required by the argument from possible no-fault disagreement. A similar point holds with regard to the persistence or

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[81] Something like this argument can be found, for instance, in Blackburn (1981, p. 177), Shafer-Landau (1994, p. 332), Schiffer (2003, Chap. 6), Lillehammer (2004, p. 97), Goldman (1990), Bennigson (1996) (though Goldman and to an extent also Bennigson at times conflate the argument with other arguments from disagreement).

[82] Railton (1993, p. 281) takes this as reason not to interpret "the" argument from disagreement along these lines.

intractability of moral disagreement, with these understood descriptively: The fact (if indeed it is a fact) that disagreement actually persists may lend some support to premise 1, but there may be other ways of supporting it, and anyway the argument does not strictly speaking require that moral disagreement be actually intractable in this descriptive sense.

In these ways, then, the argument from the possibility of rationally irresolvable disagreement requires less than arguments that start with empirical claims about actual moral disagreement and its special features. But in another way the argument requires more, for its premise incorporates a normative judgment not assumed by previous arguments, one about the rational permissibility of conflicting views in moral matters: If there can be a moral disagreement—say between Pro-Choice and Pro-Life activists with regard to the moral permissibility of abortion—where no party is being irrational in the intended sense, this means that neither a Pro-Choice nor a Pro-Life view on the permissibility of abortion is in violation of any requirements of rationality. And this means that both views are rationally permissible. The proponent of the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement, then, trades the need to establish an empirical claim for the need to establish this normative one.[83]

Notice further that the conclusion of this argument—like that of the argument from the absence of method—is restricted in scope to just those cases where rationally irresolvable disagreement is indeed possible. For this argument to pose a serious threat to metaethical realism, then, it must be shown that rationally irresolvable disagreement is possible with regard to every moral judgment, or at the very least with regard to sufficiently many, sufficiently important cases.

Now, the proponent of the argument owes us an account of what "rationally irresolvable disagreement" (or "no-fault disagreement") comes to, as these terms can be understood in more than one way. And in giving such an account it is possible to get for free either the premise 1 or the transition from it to the conclusion 2, but not both. If, for instance, one employs a very liberal understanding of "rationally irresolvable" according to which a disagreement is rationally resolvable only if one of the parties can be shown to be inconsistent, then 1 seems highly plausible, but it is exceedingly hard to see how it supports 2. After all, there are many crazy, yet internally consistent, views in physics, mathematics, philosophy, and so on, and this fact may be important in many ways, but it is hard to take it as refuting realism about any of these discourses.[84] To take the opposite extreme, if one packs too much into one's understanding of rational resolvability, so that, for instance, any mistake

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[83] Many of the metaethical issues generalize straightforwardly to metanormative ones. If this is also true of the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement (and it seems to me to be so), and seeing that the argument's premise is a normative claim (about what it is rationally permissible to believe), then this argument if sound entails also an antirealist view about its own premise. Depending on the details of the relevant antirealist view, this may cause a problem in the vicinity of self-defeat. But I cannot discuss this point further here.

[84] Bennigson's (1996, p. 414) understanding of what it takes for a disagreement to be rationally resolvable—according to which, roughly, a disagreement is rationally resolvable only if one of the parties can justify her claim on neutral, non-question-begging grounds—is almost as extreme as the understanding suggested in the text. I therefore think that the considerations in the text apply, and that Bennigson's suggestion that rational resolvability in this sense is necessary for knowledge is implausibly strong. Indeed, Bennigson refers to some unpublished work in which he argues that "our disagreements with various traditional cultures about whether illness is often caused by witchcraft may be at least as difficult to resolve rationally as our ethical disagreements with the Yanomamo." [Bennigson 1996, p. 437 (footnote 45)]. In fairness to Bennigson it should be noted, however, that he does not think rational irresolvability sufficient for the denial of realism. His argument is more complex, and it uses a further premise to the effect that in ethics—and not in other discourses—the unknowability purportedly entailed by rational irresolvability is highly implausible.

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counts as a rational flaw, then the move from 1 to 2 seems on firmer grounds, but then 1 itself cannot be supported without begging the question against the realist by assuming—not establishing—that none of a pair of contradictory moral claims need be false. The challenge, then, is to come up with an understanding of rational irresolvability or rational fault that avoids both extremes. (Indeed, perhaps the argument owes some of its appeal to the temptation to equivocate on "rationally irresolvable," thus making both 1 and its support for 2 apparently attractive.)

Let me put the intuitive idea here—without pretending that this way of putting things is satisfactorily precise—by saying that moral disagreement need not involve anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming,[85] where the paradigmatic cognitive shortcomings are failures of logic (in a perhaps wide enough sense), and the absence of (relevant) evidence. Premise 1 asserts, then, that moral disagreement is possible even in the absence of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming, and the argument moves from this claim to the denial of metaethical realism.

Before proceeding to reject premise 1, let me make two points regarding the transition from 1 to 2. First, it is tempting to think that the argument fails because it proceeds from an epistemological premise to a metaphysical conclusion, ignoring the gap between justification and truth. The possibility of a rationally irresolvable disagreement shows at most, so the thought goes, that no moral belief (in matters about which such disagreement is possible) is justified, but this does not show that none is true. Now, the argument does, I think, proceed in a suspicious way from an epistemological premise to a metaphysical conclusion, and a supporter of this argument is going to have to tell a story legitimizing such a transition.[86] But if this is the only reply that the realist can give to the argument, she faces a problem that has already been mentioned: For it would follow that none of our moral beliefs (regarding which such disagreement is possible) is justified, and this conclusion—though strictly speaking compatible with realism as I understand this view here—is nevertheless so unwelcome to the realist, that it should be avoided if at all possible.

But—and this is the second point regarding the legitimacy of the transition from 1 to 2—it remains unclear whether the epistemic justification of our beliefs should be held hostage to the necessary agreement of all who are not guilty of a cognitive shortcoming. In the general context of discussions of skepticism, for instance, the point is sometimes made that we need to distinguish between the justificatory status of our beliefs and the dialectical effectiveness we can hope to achieve in convincing the skeptic (who, we may assume, suffers from nothing worth calling a cognitive shortcoming).[87] And if this is true in the most general of epistemological contexts, it is hard to see why it does not apply in ours.[88] Perhaps, then, there can be cases of rationally irresolvable moral disagreement that nevertheless do not undermine the justificatory status of our relevant moral beliefs.[89] If so, the

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[85] I take this phrase from Wright's (1992) characterization of Cognitive Command, to which I also briefly return in footnote 95 below.

[86] For an attempt at such a story see Bennigson (1996, pp. 428–429).

[87] See, for instance Boghossian (2000, pp. 251–253). Moody-Adams (1997, Chap. 3) argues that there is no sufficient reason to believe even that such dialectical ineffectiveness is an essential feature of moral experience.

[88] Brink, Scanlon, and Shafer Landau make similar points. See Brink (1989, p. 199), Scanlon (1995, p. 353), Shafer-Landau (2003, pp. 221–227).

[89] Interestingly, Rosen (2001, p. 83) thinks this may be true of rationally irresolvable moral disagreements but not of rationally irresolvable epistemic disagreements. He does not supply with a rationale for this distinction.

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argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement poses no threat to realism, even assuming the truth of its premise.[90]

But should we accept premise 1? What can the proponent of the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement offer us by way of support for its premise? What reason is there for believing that moral disagreements are possible where no party is guilty of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming?[91] It seems to me that—as mentioned above—here again empirical observations about actual disagreements enter the picture. For we know of many cases, the thought presumably goes, where two parties to a moral disagreement are equally smart, are both careful thinkers, are both attentive to evidence either way, to arguments and counterarguments, and yet none is convinced. In such cases, the thought proceeds, both parties seem to be rational in the relevant sense, and so it would be at least implausible to attribute to them a relevant cognitive shortcoming. The support for the claim that rationally irresolvable disagreement is possible seems to come, then, in the form of an inference to the best explanation from actual disagreements that do not appear to depend on cognitive shortcomings of (at least) one of the parties.[92]

But now consider the following case: You have had conversations on many topics with both Joan and John, though you have never before observed their mathematical talents in action. Based on your acquaintance with them you have a very high opinion of their intellectual abilities. As it turns out, they are now engaged—separately—in the very same fairly complex arithmetic calculation. Observing them you notice that they are both being very careful, doing what they can to avoid mistaken reasoning and slippages. You know that none of them lacks any relevant information or evidence (it is just a calculation, after all), none of them seems over-tired or drunk, and so on. And suppose that—as is surely possible—when they are done they get different results. Here in front of you is an apparently rationally irresolvable mathematical disagreement, and yet it seems clear that you should not conclude that the disagreement is as it appears to be, that neither Joan nor John is guilty of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming. Why?

The answer, it seems to me, lies in your prior commitment to a kind of realism about arithmetical calculations. We come to this case already equipped with the (presumably justified) conviction that arithmetical calculations admit of one result. Seeing that Joan and John got different results, at most one of them can be right. And according to our antecedent beliefs about the nature of such calculations, you can only get the wrong result if you are guilty of something worth calling a cognitive shortcoming (a fallacy of some kind, or perhaps some inattention, or something of this sort). What prevents the transition from a belief in an *apparently* no-fault disagreement to a belief in a no-fault disagreement in this case is, then, your commitment to some version of realism about arithmetic.[93] Of course,

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[90] Here is Lewis (1982, p. 101) making what I think is a similar point, in the context of defending the law of non-contradiction: "No truth does have, and no truth could have, a true negation. … That may seem dogmatic. And it is: I am affirming the very thesis that Routley and Priest have called into question, and—contrary to the rules of debate—I decline to defend it. Further, I concede that it is indefensible against their challenge. They have called so much into question, that I have no foothold on undisputed ground. So much the worse for the demand that philosophers always must be ready to defend their theses under the rules of debate."

[91] Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 223) notes that we may have no good reason either to affirm or to deny (his version of) the claim in the text, and if so the argument from irresolvable disagreement fails to give a reason to reject realism.

[92] See Lillehammer (2004). Attfield (1979, pp. 519–20) mentions this way of supporting claims about rationally irresolvable disagreements, and finds it unconvincing.

[93] Nothing like Mathematical Platonism need be implied here.

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typically in cases such as Joan's and John's the disagreement is not very persistent—Joan and John can check each other's calculations, and usually come to an agreement about who made the original mistake. But even if this is not so—even if in our case they do not manage to reach agreement—still your commitment to some version of realism about arithmetic prevents you from taking the apparent rational irresolvability of the disagreement as reason to think it *is* rationally irresolvable.

The same applies, I think, in other discourses where we are intuitively comfortable with a realist view of some kind, one not allowing for rationally irresolvable disagreement: If John sees an object as square-shaped and Joan sees it as rectangular, then this alone is reason enough for us to conclude that one of them is guilty of something worth calling a cognitive shortcoming (has poor eyesight, stands too far from the relevant object, sees it in poor lighting, and so on). We are not even initially tempted to reassess our view of shapes (whatever it is), and this even without any independent evidence—independent, that is, of this very disagreement in Joan's and John's shape-judgments—that one of them is guilty of something worth calling a cognitive shortcoming.

Getting back to moral disagreement, then, suppose Dan and Dana disagree about whether the state should criminalize the use of certain drugs, Dana claiming it should and Dan that it should not. And suppose further that we have no independent evidence—independent, that is, of this very moral disagreement—that either one of them is guilty of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming. Why should we not take this very disagreement as all the reason we need to believe that at least one of them *is* guilty of such a shortcoming? In the mathematical and shape cases, our (roughly speaking) realist commitments seem to justify such an attitude. And this means that the analogous metaethical views would license the analogous attitude in the moral case. Assuming metaethical realism, then, we are perfectly entitled to take this very disagreement as reason to attribute to at least one of them a cognitive shortcoming, even if at this point we have no further story to tell about this shortcoming.[94] Of course, if we should not start off as metaethical realists this line of thought is not available to us. But this does not save the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement. Remember, the argument is supposed to present an objection to metaethical realism. But now we have found that it poses a problem for realism only if we come to this argument already rejecting (or at least not accepting) realism. If we start off as antirealists, the argument may have force on us, but not so if we start off as realists.[95] And this means that it fails as an independent objection to metaethical

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[94] For a similar point see Moore (1992, pp. 22479–22480). Tersman (2006, Chap. 2) emphasizes the general difficulties in deciding whether a given disagreement is a no-fault disagreement, as well as the specific worry that any such decision will flirt with begging the question. Now, Tersman (2006, p. 34) rightly warns against a tendentious understanding of shortcoming that will include by stipulation the absence of disagreement. So note that this is not the suggestion in the text. The suggestion, rather, is that the realist is entitled to take the disagreement as *evidence* for the existence of a cognitive shortcoming.

[95] For somewhat similar points, see Bennigson (1996, p. 425, 429) and Gowans (2000a, p. 18). The argument in the text shows that in order to decide what force to give the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement you have to already have decided (though perhaps provisionally) the debate over realism one way or another. Perhaps this is why Wright (1992) introduces his Cognitive Command (from which I borrow talk of cognitive shortcomings as features of some but not other disagreements) not in the context of *giving an argument* for or against realism, but rather in the context of *characterizing* the realist-antirealist debate.

realism. The obvious way to support premise 1 thus simply begs the question against the realist.[96]

Another way of making what I think is the same point is as follows:[97] There is bound to be some difference between Dan and Dana's psychologies (and perhaps also neuro-physiologies) in virtue of which they differ on the moral justifiability of the criminalization of certain drugs, just like there is bound to be a difference between John and Joan's psychologies (and perhaps also neuro-physiologies) in virtue of which they got different results in the arithmetical calculation. Focusing on this difference, then, are we to count it as a defect, as something worth calling a cognitive shortcoming? In both cases, it seems to me that the answer depends primarily—though perhaps not exclusively—on whether we think of moral and arithmetical facts as something out there to be noticed or missed. The answer depends, in other words, on whether or not we already accept realism about morality (and arithmetic).[98]

Assuming realism, then, we have reason to believe of any specific disagreement that it does involve something worth calling a cognitive shortcoming, and so that premise 1 itself begs the question against the realist.[99] And this point becomes even stronger when we remember that in order to pose a challenge to metaethical realism premise 1 must apply to sufficiently many, sufficiently important moral disagreements.

This does not mean that moral disagreements that are apparently rationally irresolvable are irrelevant to the debate over metaethical realism. First, if we come to this argument unbiased either for or against realism, and if it does seem implausible—pre-theoretically— to attribute a cognitive shortcoming to one of the disagreeing parties, then the argument from (apparently) rationally irresolvable disagreement does have some weight against realism. Second, and relatedly, after having rejected the characterization of such disagreements as genuinely rationally irresolvable in the way discussed above, the realist may still need to explain the appearance that the disagreement was a no-fault one. She owes an account, in other words, of what it is that leads smart, sensitive, well-reasoning, sober persons to disagree on such matters. And how well the realist faces this explanatory challenge may have an effect on the plausibility of her realism.[100] But, first, I see no reason

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[96] Here is a closely related point: It is sometimes said in an attempt to capture the idea of a no-fault disagreement that moral disagreement survives the elimination of all mistakes of reasoning and all false non-moral beliefs. But this way of understanding what "no-fault" comes to begs the question against the realist. For what reason (that does not already presuppose the denial of realism) is there to distinguish between moral and non-moral false beliefs? If not being rationally at fault requires elimination of mistaken beliefs, it also requires—unless we already reject metaethical realism—the elimination of mistaken moral beliefs, and then it seems clear that there can be no no-fault moral disagreement. And if we decide not to take moral mistakes as establishing a rational fault, then perhaps no-fault moral disagreements are possible, but why believe that this shows anything about metaethical realism? Perhaps, for instance, scientific disagreement can survive the elimination of all non-scientific mistakes, but surely this does not support the rejection of scientific realism. Lillehammer (2004, p. 99), for instance, counts reliability on both sides among the necessary conditions for no-fault disagreement, but does not notice that this raises the problem discussed in this footnote in an especially troubling way.

[97] I thank Josh Schechter for discussions on this point.

[98] Because I reject premise 1, I can afford not to discuss Tersman's (2006, Chap. 4) discussion of Wright's dilemma (for the realist), one horn of which is premise 1, the other a commitment to some sort of inaccessibility of moral truths.

[99] Brink (2001) thinks there is just no good reason to believe either that irresolvable disagreement is possible or that it is not.

[100] I therefore concede here a point central to Gowans' (2000a, p. 16) version of the argument from disagreement—that an apparently rationally irresolvable disagreement is at least some prima facie evidence against realism.

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to suspect that the kind of considerations discussed in Sect. 4.4 above cannot do the explanatory work needed here in a realist-friendly way,[101] and second, and perhaps more importantly in the context of the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement, nothing in the realist's reply to *this* argument hinges on her doing this explanatory work (just like we should not believe that Joan's and John's disagreement is a non-fault one even without a further story to tell about either Joan's or John's arithmetical error).

10 From Disagreement, via the Absence of Epistemic Access, to the Denial of Realism

Perhaps the problem moral disagreement points to is that in cases of moral disagreement—or perhaps just in cases where the disagreement involves no apparent cognitive short-coming of any of the parties—we have no way of knowing, of finding out who is right and who wrong.[102] The problem, it may be thought, is that at least on realist grounds there is no plausible way of giving an account of moral knowledge, indeed of justified moral belief. How is it, the thought goes, that our moral beliefs track reasonably reliably these supposed objective moral facts? And if they do not, does it not follow—assuming this is what our moral beliefs have to track to be true, that is, assuming realism—that moral knowledge is impossible, and that therefore there is no way of deciding moral disagreement? And is this not a reductio ad absurdum of realism?[103]

I think there is in the vicinity here a serious challenge for realism, though some work needs to be done to make it reasonably precise and explicit, and to distinguish it from other, less promising, challenges and objections. The worry, which I address at length elsewhere,[104] is that on realist—or at least robustly realist—assumptions there is no plausible way of explaining the supposed correlation between our moral beliefs and the moral truths (invoking an empirically dubious faculty of rational intuition amounts, the thought goes, to naming the mystery rather than demystifying it),[105] that without a satis-factory explanation such a correlation is too mysterious to be admitted, and that without

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[101] Notice again how unhelpful it would be to invoke indeterminacy. The problem was to explain how it is that at least one of two well-informed, well-reasoning, intelligent individuals is nevertheless mistaken. Invoking indeterminacy makes things worse, because it makes the disagreement pointless, perhaps even silly (like a disagreement about a borderline heap, with one party insisting that it is, and the other that it is not, a heap). And now we need to explain how it is that *two* well-informed, well-reasoning, intelligent individuals nevertheless participate in such a silly disagreement, apparently committing themselves to the (probably determinately) false belief that their view is determinately correct.

[102] Seeing that others disagree, should we not at least take back some of our confidence in our moral judgments? Perhaps so, but this has nothing to do with an argument from disagreement to antirealism. What this thought shows is that we should—in morality as elsewhere—update our beliefs in accordance with the evidence, and that the evidence sometimes includes the fact that others have different beliefs. No realist should reject this. For some discussion of this point in the context of moral disagreement, see Shafer-Landau (2006, pp. 221–224). Also see footnote 108 below.

[103] Loeb (1998, p. 285) understands "the traditional argument from disagreement" as something along the lines in the text, though he ties it also to the IBE-version of the argument from disagreement. Brandt's (1944) discussion is very similar in these respects. And Schiffer's (2003, pp. 245–252) discussion of the "argument from irresolubility" eventually boils down to the general epistemic challenge of accounting for a priori moral knowledge.

[104] "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It" (unpublished manuscript).

[105] Tolhurst (1987) argues that moral disagreement forces the realist to posit such a faculty.

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such a correlation the epistemic status of our moral beliefs is threatened (most directly their reliability, but eventually perhaps also their justification and their claim to knowledge).[106]

Though I think that at the end of the day the realist—even the robust realist—can suggest a satisfactory reply to this worry, it is a worry I do not want to underestimate—indeed, I think it is the most serious challenge facing Robust Realism. But the relevant point in our context is not so much how seriously this epistemological worry should be taken but rather the striking fact that it can be stated without any reference to moral disagreement. The real worry is that too robust a realism may lead to skepticism, to the impossibility of moral knowledge and even warranted or justified moral beliefs. Moral disagreement may be a powerful heuristic, a real-life reminder of this epistemological worry. But it plays at most a limited role in the general epistemological challenge for realism.[107]

This does not mean that moral disagreement is irrelevant here. The realist has to address the challenge of coming up with an appropriate moral epistemology, and here moral disagreement may again be very relevant, setting adequacy constraints on possible ways of addressing it. Think of self-evidence again: Self-evidence can be thought of as the beginning of a moral epistemology that (among other things) explains the correlation between our moral beliefs and the moral truths. But—as can be seen from Sect. 3 above—it is hard to reconcile a moral epistemology grounded in self-evidence with facts about moral disagreement. And this is an example of how moral disagreement can be relevant to the epistemological challenge: It counts rather heavily against one attempt at addressing it (in terms of self-evidence).

Disagreement can thus make matters harder for the realist, not because disagreement itself grounds an argument against realism, but because disagreement sets adequacy constraints on ways of addressing the general epistemological challenge to realism.

This, it seems to me, is the most interesting role moral disagreement may have as a part of an objection to realism.[108] And seeing that I will not here suggest a realist response to the epistemological challenge, I cannot discuss it further. Let me just note that the problem here mentioned—the general epistemological challenge, and the fact that (some kind of) disagreement may make it harder to address it—is not a problem only for ethics. It is, it seems, just the problem of coming up with a plausible epistemology of the a priori. Noting the generality of the problem is not, of course, tantamount to solving it, but it does, I think, give some reason to believe that there is such a solution to be found.

11 Conclusion, and a Note on Higher-Order Arguments from Disagreement

Where does the discussion leave us, then? Some of the arguments from disagreement I have considered above are rather clearly confused (the argument from tolerance and the

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[106] This way of understanding the epistemological challenge to realism follows Field's (1989, pp. 25–30) understanding of the analogous problem for Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics, often referred to as the Benacerraf Problem (Benacerraf 1973).

[107] This is especially clear in Schiffer's (2003, p. 248) discussion, where claims about irresolvable disagreement ultimately rest on claims about the impossibility of moral knowledge.

[108] Disagreement may have other epistemological implications, ones that pose a challenge of much more general scope than merely metaethical realism, for instance in the context of the implications of what has come to be called "peer disagreement". For my view on the epistemic significance of such disagreement, and for many references, see my "Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (But Not Too Seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement" (unpublished manuscript).

argument that purports to proceed deductively from actual disagreement), some can be seen to beg the question against the realist (the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement, some versions of the argument from the absence of method, and to an extent also the IBE version of the argument from actual disagreement), or at least rely on a premise that from a realist-friendly perspective is highly implausible (one version of the argument from the absence of method and the argument from internalism, and perhaps also the argument from self-evidence), some manage to point at genuine problems for realism, but problems that are not after all essentially related to moral disagreement (the argument from semantic access and one version of the argument from the absence of method). Some of the arguments do have some force, presenting a prima facie challenge realists must face, but not, I argued, a challenge we have any reason to believe realists cannot face (the IBE version of the argument from actual disagreement, and perhaps also the argument from rationally irresolvable disagreement and the argument undermining the support agreement would—some realists think—have lent to realism). And the phenomenon of moral disagreement can cause problems for realism also in another way—by setting adequacy constraints on realist ways of addressing the most general semantic and epistemological challenges.

Perhaps some of these arguments can be amended in a way that renders moral disagreement more problematic for the realist. Perhaps some auxiliary premises (such as some version of internalism) can be defended in a non-question-begging way, such that together with them some claim about moral disagreement would entail, or at least support, a conclusion incompatible with metaethical realism. But I do not now see how any such line can be convincingly pursued. Nor can I think of other ways in which disagreement may be thought of as a problem for realism, though, of course, I have not given any argument supporting the exhaustiveness of the list of arguments discussed above. I leave it to antirealists to present better versions of arguments from disagreement.[109]

Let me conclude by emphasizing a fact that will make this an exceedingly hard task. Disagreement is widespread not just *in* morality, but also *about* morality, in metaethics, and indeed in philosophy in general.[110] Here too, one comes across widespread disagreement among those who do not appear to be guilty of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming, here too this disagreement seems to call for explanation, here too it is not clear that there is some underlying agreement, say about the method to settle superficial disagreements. But this means that it is not going to be easy to present an argument from moral disagreement that does not defeat itself.[111] If, for instance, the argument takes actual disagreement as a reason to be suspicious of realism, then given actual disagreement about metaethical realism and indeed about arguments from disagreement (this one included), the proponent of the argument seems to be committing

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[109] Notice that the discussion above—if successful—also casts doubt on the availability of antirealist arguments that are based on combining the effect of more than one of the arguments from disagreement.

[110] Dworkin (1996, p. 114) argues that there is *more* disagreement in philosophy than in morality.

[111] For a somewhat similar point see Swinburne (1976). Shafer-Landau (2003, p. 220; 2006, pp. 218–221) notices that arguments from disagreement can be applied in philosophy in general, and in metaethics in particular, so that there is something self-defeating about the antirealist's employment of this argument from disagreement. But Shafer-Landau does not notice that this may render the arguments from disagreement *themselves* self-defeating in the way described in the text. Tersman (2006, p. 112) notices that a key premise in his favorite argument from disagreement—the one he calls "the latitude idea"—applies to much in philosophy as well as to ethics. But he does not proceed to discuss the self-defeat worry this fact may give rise to.

himself also to a denial of realism *about* the realism debate in metaethics and so about his very argument. If an argument is constructed with the conclusion that apparently rationally irresolvable disagreement gives rise to a denial of a unique truth value, then given apparently rationally irresolvable disagreement about this very argument and its conclusion, the proponent of the argument cannot consistently defend the truth of his conclusion.[112] (Does it seem plausible that one need not be guilty of anything worth calling a cognitive shortcoming in order to reject, say, ideas about gender equality, but that rejecting the antirealist's favorite argument from disagreement must involve a cognitive shortcoming?) And so on.

Thus, in order to present an argument from moral disagreement that poses a serious problem for metaethical realism it is necessary that the relevant argument should avoid not only the kinds of flaws discussed throughout this paper, but also this kind of self-defeat. And given the similarities between the purportedly relevant features of moral and metaethical disagreement,[113] it is hard to see how such an argument can be constructed.

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[112] Schiffer's (2003, Chap. 6) version of an argument from irresolvable disagreement is an especially clear case, except the conclusion is the denial of *determinate* truth. But an argument that undermines the determinate truth of its premises or conclusion seems just as disturbingly self-defeating as one that undermines their truth.

[113] This is perhaps clearest with regard to the IBE-arguments from disagreements. Disagreement about which explanation is *best* is, of course, a normative disagreement, and it is hard to see what features distinguish between it and paradigmatic moral disagreements.

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