Moral realism, quasi-realism and moral steadfastness

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Abstract
Some moral propositions are so obviously true that we refuse to doubt them, even where we believe that many people disagree. Following Fritz and McPherson, I call our behaviour in such cases 'moral steadfastness'. In this paper, I argue for two metaethical implications of moral steadfastness. I first argue that morally steadfast behaviour is sufficiently prevalent to present an important challenge for some prominent analogies between moral epistemology and non-moral forms of epistemology. These analogies are often pressed by moral realists. I then argue that moral quasi-realism, unlike realism, can explain and vindicate our presumption that moral steadfastness is frequently rational. On the assumption that we frequently act as it is rational to act, quasi-realism is therefore well placed to explain why we are so frequently morally steadfast. I conclude that this is an important respect in which quasi-realism is explanatorily preferable to realism.

1. INTRODUCTION
Some moral propositions are so obviously true that we refuse to doubt them, even where we believe that many people disagree. Following Fritz and McPherson (2019), I call our behaviour in such cases 'moral steadfastness'. This is understood as steadfastness in the face of what we believe to be 'pure' moral disagreement: disagreement where no relevant non-moral facts are disputed (Fritz and McPherson, 2019, p. 44). Consider:

> Homosexuality: I judge that homosexuality is morally permissible. However, I also believe that an enormous number of people, now and throughout history, disagree with me: they judge that homosexuality is morally impermissible. Moreover, I believe that my disagreement with a great many of these people does not rest on a disagreement over non-moral facts. (Fritz and McPherson, 2019, p. 43)[1]

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[1] Some might doubt that this moral disagreement is pure, since many people who disapprove of homosexuality also believe that homosexuality is prohibited by their religion, or that it causes harm to individuals or to society. However, it also appears that many people treat homosexuality as wrong in and of itself. Indeed, there is empirical evidence that very many people treat certain sexual behaviours in this way (e.g. Haidt 2012, especially pp. 146–63). On my view, Homosexuality very plausibly represents a case of pure moral disagreement, and I will generally assume this. Nevertheless, what follows requires only the more general claim that there are cases of pure moral disagreement. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for stressing the importance of this point, and for suggesting, as a very plausible example of pure moral disagreement, disagreement about whether or not anything morally matters aside from the consequences of our actions.

As Fritz and McPherson (2019, p. 43) stress, it appears rational to remain steadfast here, rather than to 'conciliate' (by which they mean 'reduce confidence in one's belief'). Similarly, it seems irrational to doubt that we should carefully avoid harming animals, or that women are as entitled to education and employment as men, just because we know that these are controversial judgments. We feel it would only be possible to rationally reduce confidence in such moral beliefs if further investigation were to yield relevant non-moral knowledge (as if, for example, we were to discover that only humans feel pain). And, where this occurs, we move beyond pure moral disagreement.

In this paper, I consider two aspects of moral steadfastness, along with their metaethical implications. First, I consider the extent of morally steadfast *behaviour*, and I argue that its prevalence poses an important challenge for some moral realists. Second, moral steadfastness is often presumed to be *rational*, as with Homosexuality, and I argue that this provides support for moral quasi-realism over realism. Before addressing the arguments, however, I must say something about the metaethical theories.

Moral realists claim that moral judgments express moral beliefs, some of which are true. Many realists endorse Shafer-Landau's (2003, p. 15) thesis of 'stance-independence': the claim that there exist moral standards that fix moral facts independently of any given actual or hypothetical human perspective. Robust realists, like Enoch (2011), FitzPatrick (2008) and Shafer-Landau (2003), also claim, unlike Boyd (1988) or Brink (1989) for example, that moral properties like wrongness are *non-natural* properties: they stand outside the purview of the sciences. Robust realists typically understand moral properties to be, as FitzPatrick (2008, p. 166) says, 'irreducibly evaluative or normative'. For robust realists, it is a stance-independent, irreducibly normative fact that torture is wrong.

In contrast, expressivists claim that moral judgments express desires or other motivating attitudes. Nevertheless, quasi-realist expressivists, notably Blackburn (1993; 1998), argue that we quite rightly talk of moral truth and moral properties. Blackburn endorses the deflationary theory of truth, which entails that to assert that *p* is true is just to assert that *p*. When I say that torture is wrong, I express a complex attitude of disapproval towards torture, and when I say that it is *true* that torture is wrong, I express the same attitude. Talk of truth might intensify my expressed disapproval, but it adds nothing substantive. Many other terms are then seen in the same deflationary light. If it is true that torture is wrong, then my assertion that torture is wrong is truth-apt. Since beliefs have truth-apt contents, this assertion is plausibly an expression of a *belief* that torture is wrong. We can similarly talk of the *fact* that torture is wrong, or the *property* of wrongness, and so on, all the while expressing disapproving attitudes (e.g. Blackburn 1998). This, the quasi-realist argues, is just how moral language works: wherever we assert a moral claim, any terms used within that assertion are employed to express first-order moral evaluation.

Quasi-realists are therefore happy to assert that torture is truly wrong, while claiming that this assertion is fundamentally an expression of a desire-like attitude. This seems counterintuitive to many people. Yet, as Timmons (1998, p. 12) notes, one desideratum for any plausible metaethical theory is that it should 'comport with deeply embedded presumptions of ordinary moral discourse and practice'. Although quasi-realists argue that their theory *does* comport with such presumptions, we might worry that it is less well-placed to do so than those theories which entail the intuitively more plausible claim that moral assertions simply express moral beliefs. Therefore, if quasi-realism can explain some of the features of ordinary moral practice better than its rival theories, this will be a significant boon.

In §2, I argue that morally steadfast behaviour is sufficiently prevalent to pose a challenge for certain prominent analogies between moral epistemology and non-moral forms

of epistemology. These analogies are often pressed by moral realists. In §3, I claim that quasi-realism, unlike realism, explains the rationality of moral steadfastness in cases like Homosexuality. I conclude that this is an important respect in which quasi-realism is explanatorily preferable to realism.

2. MORAL REALISM AND MORALLY STEADFAST BEHAVIOUR

Moral realists generally believe we can acquire knowledge of moral facts, and they often seek to provide a suitable theory of moral epistemology. Several realists aim to do so by analogy with some non-moral kind of epistemology. In this section, I outline a highly generalized version of what is, I think, the most common and persuasive kind of epistemological theory suggested by *robust* moral realists, which I label 'mathematical analogism'. I then argue that the prevalence of morally steadfast behaviour poses a significant challenge for this theory. I conclude this section by arguing that similar challenges confront other moral realists, who argue for other, similarly analogous, theories of moral epistemology.

Mathematical analogism holds that we come to know the truth of an important set of moral propositions in something very like the way that we acquire a priori, non-moral knowledge, such as that '4 is greater than 2'. This is *very* broadly construed, but I believe that the argument as presented below applies equally to any such accounts that may be found in the literature. (I focus on mathematical truths, but relevant arguments apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to logical truths.)

Mathematical analogism has been employed since at least the time of the Cambridge Platonists, most notably by intuitionists: those who claim that a core set of moral propositions are self-evident. For example, Ross (1930, p. 29–30) claims that the truth of certain moral propositions is 'self-evident just as a mathematical axiom, or the validity of a form of inference, is evident'. Huemer (2016, p. 1986) explains the benefits of this, for what he calls 'rationalist intuitionism':

> Rationalist intuitionism simply needs the assumption that there is *some* substantive, a priori (non-evaluative) knowledge. Knowledge requires a reliable belief-forming mechanism… so there must be a reliable mechanism that produces these non-evaluative a priori beliefs. Whatever that mechanism is, the rationalist intuitionist maintains, that mechanism is also capable of producing some moral beliefs. This is why it is plausible to think that some moral beliefs might be sufficiently reliable to qualify as knowledge. (Huemer, 2016, p. 1986)

We might doubt that substantive, a priori knowledge is possible, but this is not my concern here. Consider instead the argument, here explicit, that we should accept the possibility of acquiring knowledge of non-natural moral facts, because there is a close parallel between moral epistemology and that acceptable kind of epistemology that delivers knowledge of mathematical or logical truths. Clearly, the reliability or respectability of mathematical epistemology is only useful to the mathematical analogist if she can persuade us that we acquire knowledge of non-natural moral facts in a very similar way, and preferably in the *same* kind of way, that we acquire knowledge of mathematical truths.

It is not only avowed intuitionists who rely on this kind of analogy. For example, while Shafer-Landau (2003) argues that true moral beliefs are about self-evident propositions, for Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's (2014) later theory, a core set of moral propositions are conceptual truths. In each case, we are said to acquire moral knowledge in the same kind of way that we acquire knowledge of non-moral self-evident or conceptual truths. If any truths

are self-evident or conceptual truths, then the paradigm examples are mathematical and logical truths.

Following Cowie (2014), we might be suspicious of all such 'Companions in Guilt' arguments. If mathematical analogists believe that their understanding of moral epistemology is plausible, they should explain, and so justify, this belief. If they can do so *only* by analogy with mathematical epistemology, then we must ask why they cannot do so directly. We should worry that there is something, perhaps as yet unnoticed, that renders the two cases importantly disanalogous. This worry can only be assuaged by an independent argument in favour of the relevant kind of moral epistemology – at which point, of course, the analogy will no longer be required.

However, even if Companions in Guilt arguments can be generally salvaged, the prevalence of morally steadfast behaviour provides a more specific argument against mathematical analogism. This is as follows:

(1) Typically, our response to widespread disagreement in cases of pure mathematical disagreement involves conciliation.
(2) If mathematical analogism is true, then our typical response to widespread disagreement in cases of pure mathematical disagreement will be identical to our typical response to widespread disagreement in cases of pure moral disagreement.
(3) So, if mathematical analogism is true then, typically, our response to widespread disagreement in cases of pure moral disagreement involves conciliation.
(4) It is not the case that our response to widespread disagreement in cases of pure moral disagreement typically involves conciliation.
(5) So, mathematical analogism is false.

Note that (1) and (4) are empirical claims, based mainly on general observation. Common experience suggests that Homosexuality represents a genuine moral position, held by many people today. There appear to be other cases of moral steadfastness, but not any equivalent cases concerning pure mathematical disagreement.

How might the mathematical analogist respond? She might, perhaps, argue that Homosexuality does not represent a case of genuinely pure moral disagreement. Perhaps people only disapprove of homosexuality where they hold some relevant non-moral beliefs that we do not share. However, this alone cannot help her. Moral steadfastness requires only that we *believe* that our disagreement rests on no disagreement about non-moral facts. Given this, Homosexuality appears to be a widely held position.

Furthermore, even if Homosexuality is not a widely held position, the above argument only requires that there are significantly more cases of moral steadfastness than of mathematical steadfastness. To recall another example from §1, we remain steadfast in our belief that women ought to be given the same career opportunities as men, despite many people believing otherwise. Relatedly, we do not think that the mere fact that women and men have traditionally held different social roles suggests that they morally ought to remain in these roles, although we know that many people do think this.

More generally, it appears that people often remain confident in their moral judgments in the face of seemingly compelling reasons to conciliate. Consider Haidt's (2012, pp. 19–25) studies, which demonstrate that people often remain steadfast in their moral judgments even when they recognize that they cannot articulate any justifications for them. Further, I suspect that most people have witnessed situations where an individual remains in steadfast moral disagreement with a wider group, where no non-moral claims are disputed.

I doubt that parallel situations concerning mathematical disagreement are at all commonplace. Generally, we remain steadfast in pure mathematical disagreement only where

we have strong doubts that our disputants are our epistemic peers. Where we believe that we share roughly the same evidence base as our opponents, and that they have no epistemic defects, we tend to conciliate where we find widespread mathematical disagreement.

Consider Fritz and McPherson's (2019, p. 43) example, in which one mentally calculates that 18% of a $45 tip is $8.10, but then finds that one's friends believe it to be $8.20. I take it that most people would conciliate in such a case. Admittedly, in this kind of case, unlike in a case like Homosexuality, there is a general consensus about the axioms and algorithms which are required to arrive at the correct answer, even if we sometimes disagree about who among us has employed them correctly. Presumably, nothing in the moral case closely parallels these widely endorsed axioms or algorithms.[2] However, this merely shows that such mathematical disagreements are importantly disanalogous with the kinds of moral disagreement with which we are here concerned. This can only help the mathematical analogist if she can also show that there are *other* cases of mathematical disagreement which present more appropriate analogies, and in which we do not conciliate in the face of widespread disagreement. It is very unclear, to me at least, that there are any such cases.

People sometimes disagree over mathematical axioms and algorithms, and it seems that they are very likely to conciliate if they discover that such disagreement is widespread. For example, it certainly appears that many people who learn about the axiom of choice initially find it intuitively plausible, but then conciliate just because they learn that many other people believe that it has implausible mathematical consequences. Perhaps, if we were to find that a great many of our peers denied something seemingly obvious, such as that two and two are four, we might not conciliate. I suspect that we would find this so peculiar that we *would* conciliate, although I am sure that many other people would suspect otherwise. This hypothetical case is such an implausible one that I do not suppose our intuitions about it can be reliable. However, all that matters for my purposes here is that such cases do not occur. There appear to be very few, if any, cases where we are aware that many of our epistemic peers disagree with us over some mathematical belief, and where we do not conciliate for this reason. Given this, moral steadfastness appears to be a significantly more prevalent phenomenon than mathematical steadfastness.

I do not suggest that moral steadfastness is a necessary or universal feature of moral psychology. To support (1) and (4), it is sufficient that people *do* appear to conciliate in significantly more cases of pure mathematical disagreement than of pure moral disagreement. If the mathematical analogist disagrees, we must await her argument.

Perhaps, however, she should attack (2). Indeed, Fritz and McPherson (2019, p. 50) provide support here, by suggesting that the rationality of moral steadfastness is 'best explained by *moral* pressures on our moral beliefs'. They argue, and I agree, that it would be immoral to react to Homosexuality by seriously considering becoming homophobic. Further, they suggest, our moral and epistemic reasons are closely connected in such cases, so that it is rational to avoid conciliation. I strongly doubt that *any* purely mathematical disagreements provide moral reasons to prefer some conclusions to others. If any do, they are surely rare. The mathematical analogist could, therefore, argue that we remain steadfast in cases of pure moral disagreement where we have moral and epistemic reasons to do so, and that we rarely or never have similar reasons to remain steadfast in comparable cases of pure mathematical disagreement.

This is, I think, the only plausible response available to the mathematical analogist, but it poses a serious challenge for her argument. Any close analogy between moral epistemology and mathematical epistemology at least appears to predict conciliation in cases

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[2] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for very helpfully pushing me on this point, and for suggesting disagreement about the axiom of choice as an appropriate parallel.

like Homosexuality. To allow for this, the mathematical analogist must either show why it does not or accept that her analogy is significantly weaker than her forbears have typically suggested, and then explain why her general analogy should nevertheless inspire confidence in her account of moral epistemology. Certainly, the foregoing suggests that mathematical analogists can no longer claim that we acquire moral knowledge in the *same* kind of way that we acquire mathematical knowledge. The prevalence of moral steadfastness, and the relative scarcity of any mathematical equivalent, demonstrates an important difference between the two kinds of epistemology, aside from their distinct domains of knowledge.

I do not, of course, claim that this represents a fatal argument for mathematical analogism. I aim only to argue that there is a significant challenge to be met. Of course, robust realists need not rely on any epistemological analogy. They might claim that moral belief-formation is *sui generis*: a possibility that Enoch (2011, p. 176–7) seriously considers. However, as Enoch (2011, p. 175) seems willing to concede of his own epistemological account, any such strategy seems unlikely to persuade those already sceptical of robust realism. It is for this kind of reason that robust realists often turn to something like mathematical analogism. Therefore, the above challenge will be important for many robust realists to address.

Moreover, mathematical analogists are not the only realists who argue for an analogy between moral belief-formation and some non-moral kind of belief-formation. Consider, for example, Oddie's (2005) argument that we can form true beliefs about value via our desires. Here, moral uncertainty and error occur because to desire is to experience value from a partial perspective. Oddie thus relies on a parallel between moral and *perceptual* belief-formation, so that moral error is something like the mistake made by claiming that distant cows are small cows. Again, we do not see anything analogous to moral steadfastness in this kind of case. Where we discover that many people disagree with us about the size of certain objects, I suggest, we are typically very likely to conciliate, at least to some degree. Therefore, Oddie's parallel faces similar problems to that of the mathematical analogist.

Consider too the kind of naturalistic realist theory often known as 'Cornell realism' (e.g. Boyd 1988; Brink 1989).[3] By any theory of this kind, a moral property like goodness is 'an ordinary natural property', albeit a potentially very difficult one to identify (Boyd 1988, p. 206). Cornell realists deny that we can learn much about the nature of moral properties by analysing our moral language, any more than we could learn that water is H_2O by analysing the term 'water'. Instead, they argue, moral properties require very careful empirical investigation. Therefore, as Boyd stresses of his own theory, Cornell realism takes the 'analogy between moral inquiry and scientific inquiry… *very* seriously' (1988, p. 204, original emphasis). If moral goodness is an ordinary natural property, then we ought to allow that people do, and should, form beliefs about goodness via very similar methods and mechanisms to those by which they form beliefs about the kinds of complex properties that are typically studied within the sciences.

Do we see anything that closely parallels moral steadfastness where people form beliefs about such natural properties? Although I doubt it, I remain uncertain. I think it is very difficult to say for sure, since these properties and our responses to them are highly varied. However, most scientists, and presumably also most non-scientists, think that the most *appropriate* way to respond to widespread disagreement about such properties must involve conciliation. This again suggests an important disanalogy, since we do not believe that we ought to conciliate in cases like Homosexuality.

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[3] I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to consider how my challenge to mathematical analogism might also apply to the kind of epistemological account suggested by Cornell realism.

To be clear, I do not think that Cornell realists need worry as much as mathematical analogists about such disanalogies. This is for the simple reason that it is generally accepted that ordinary natural properties exist, whereas many people doubt that non-natural properties exist. One reason why many robust realists argue for mathematical analogism is to support their argument that we *should* accept the existence of non-natural properties, by persuading us that we can form beliefs and knowledge about such properties via a familiar and reliable kind of mechanism. Cornell realism requires no similar argument. Nevertheless, I think that the above disanalogy is an important one for the Cornell realist to explain.

More generally, I suggest that any theorist who argues that we acquire moral beliefs via a similar mechanism to that by which we acquire non-moral beliefs must show that their argument can account for the specific behaviours involved. Here, I have focused on only one such behaviour: moral steadfastness. It seems entirely possible that the kind of steadfast behaviour found in cases of pure moral disagreement is unique to the moral domain. If so, the prospects look bleak for *any* moral epistemology that relies on an analogy with other forms of epistemology.

Next, I turn from considerations of the prevalence of steadfast behaviour to those of the rationality of moral steadfastness. I will argue that our presumption of rationality in cases like Homosexuality provides support for quasi-realist over realist metaethical theories.

3. QUASI-REALISM AND THE RATIONALITY OF MORAL STEADFASTNESS
Fritz and McPherson argue, I think rightly, for the following claim:

> Asymmetry: Epistemic rationality often requires (or permits) a *more steadfast* response to pure moral disagreement than it does to otherwise analogous non-moral disagreement. (Fritz and McPherson, 2019, p. 44)

In §2, we saw Fritz and McPherson's claim that we have moral reasons to remain steadfast in cases like Homosexuality. However, they argue that this claim alone cannot explain Asymmetry, and that it 'appears straightforwardly compatible with a variety of both realist and anti-realist meta-ethical views' (Fritz and McPherson, 2019, p. 51, emphasis removed). I will argue that quasi-realism can explain *and* vindicate our presumption that it is rational to remain steadfast in cases like Homosexuality. I will focus on Blackburn's (1993; 1998) quasi-realist theory, but I think it very likely that many or all other quasi-realist theories could adopt something like the following account (e.g. Ridge 2015; Sinclair 2021). However, no similar account is available to any realist theory which entails the existence of stance-independent moral facts.

For the quasi-realist, to doubt one's own moral beliefs is to consider first-order evaluative questions about whether they stand up to the kinds of moral thinking in which one ought to engage. On Blackburn's (1998, p. 318) account, it is to accept that, if one improved one's thinking about the case, one might change one's mind. If I am unsure whether I am correct in judging it permissible to eat meat, then I am acknowledging that I might come to judge otherwise, perhaps if I were to learn more information or think more sensitively about the pain of animals. If I am confident that a moral belief is true, then I am confident that no such change in my thinking would alter it.

Egan (2007, p. 214) argues that quasi-realism thus provides an 'account of moral error' on which 'a moral belief is mistaken only if it's not stable'. A stable belief is one that would survive any of the kinds of reflection of which the believer approves, or which she would approve of on further reflection. If Egan's interpretation of quasi-realism is correct, and if we know that quasi-realism is correct, then we also know, a priori, that if we possess any stable beliefs then they are true beliefs. Each of us is committed to a first-order moral

belief that Bex-Priestley (2018, p. 1059) calls the 'Anti-Realist Conditional (ARC)': 'Necessarily, if my judgement J is stable, then it is true'.

If we accept Egan's interpretation of quasi-realism, then it certainly does appear rational for me to remain steadfast in cases like Homosexuality, given my commitment to ARC. Wherever I have sufficiently good reasons to judge that my moral belief is stable, then I have equally good reasons to believe it to be true. The fact that many other people hold contradictory beliefs need not suggest that my belief is false, no matter how stable *their* beliefs might be. True, I might want to reconsider whether my own belief *is* stable, given such widespread disagreement. Nevertheless, I can be certain that if my belief is stable, then it is true, regardless of whether my opponents' beliefs are stable or unstable.

However, we might worry – as Blackburn (2009, p. 203) does – that quasi-realism cannot be plausible, if it entails the account of moral error suggested by Egan. Rather than offering an improved account of moral error, Blackburn denies that quasi-realism should provide *any* account of what moral error is. Instead, Blackburn (2009, p. 207) argues, the quasi-realist should aim to explain of moral error only 'what we are up to when we impute it, or fear it, or confidently dismiss it as a possibility'. Blackburn (2009, p. 207) thus continues with his standard deflationary approach: 'Moral *p* is mistaken or erroneous if and only if ¬*p* – and that is all that should be said'. If so, we have no reason to endorse ARC. According to Blackburn, therefore, quasi-realism allows that I – no less than anyone else – can hold false but stable beliefs.

Despite their differences, Bex-Priestley and Blackburn agree that quasi-realism allows that we often have good reasons to consider the moral views of others. The quasi-realist believes that we are most likely to improve our moral knowledge, not by considering how we currently feel about the non-moral facts (as a subjectivist might claim), but by reflecting on the non-moral facts as carefully and as sensitively as possible. In many cases of pure moral disagreement, we should recognize that our opponents might change our minds, even where we are initially very confident about our own moral positions. Other people's approaches to moralising may be superior to ours, and, by entering into pure evaluative disagreements with such people, we may improve our responses to the non-moral facts.

In what follows, I will take no position on whether or not quasi-realism requires us to endorse ARC. I will argue that, even without committing us to ARC, quasi-realism can explain why it is rational to remain morally steadfast in cases like Homosexuality. This is largely because the *practice* of questioning whether my belief is true is a practice in virtue of which I question whether that belief is stable. To assess any of my moral beliefs, I must consider the kinds of reflective practice of which I do or should approve, and then ask whether my belief does or would survive these. Any such exercise should only make me conciliate if it results in my recognizing that the belief might not survive some reflective practice of a kind which *I* either do or should approve. The mere fact that many people possess contradictory beliefs does not suggest this; indeed, where we strongly disagree, any such beliefs will likely be repugnant to me. Therefore, this fact alone should not make me conciliate. Moreover, this is all compatible with the claim that any widespread disagreement about non-evaluative, stance-independent facts *should* make me conciliate.

To explain all this, I will draw on Blackburn's (1998, pp. 53–59) argument that, if we are to understand someone as possessing mental states of any kind, then we must believe that they conform, at least generally, to the normative order given by those states. For example, we can only understand someone as having a desire for money if they show some interest in accruing money, or if we understand them as having other mental states which counter this desire. We can make no sense of someone's having this desire unless they behave as if they want money, at least within the context of their other mental states as we understand them. This general point is important here, since – I will argue – we can more easily make sense of

those towards whom we are opposed in pure moral disagreement than we can of those towards whom we are opposed in disagreement about stance-independent, non-evaluative facts.

Consider the following two cases:

Homophobe: Unlike us, Homophobe believes that homosexuality is impermissible, despite agreeing with us on all relevant non-moral facts, including the harmlessness of homosexuality and the harmfulness of attempting to legislate against it or prevent it.

Flat-Earther: Unlike us, Flat-Earther believes that the Earth is flat, despite agreeing with us on all the relevant facts (other than the fact that the Earth is spherical) which lead us to believe that the Earth is spherical.

In both cases, we are presented with a hypothesis by someone who believes it to be true, despite their also agreeing with everything which *we* take to be evidence that the hypothesis is false. How can we best make sense of their holding these beliefs?

We can very easily do so in the case of Homophobe, I suggest, by simply understanding him to lack a moral concern which we possess. Homophobe clearly does not *care* about the relevant pains or harms – or, at least, not to the same degree, or not in the same way – that we care. Our disagreement therefore occurs just because, when Homophobe contemplates the non-moral facts, he does not care as we care. We need not assume that he has made any error by his own lights. Indeed, we should not assume this, at least not without further evidence, since it is entirely possible for people to *coherently* endorse reprehensible views, so that they possess stable, but false, moral beliefs. We must, therefore, allow that Homophobe's moral beliefs may be stable, such that he would fully endorse them no matter how much he reflected on them, even if we know some of them to be false.

We cannot make sense of Flat-Earther's belief in any similar way. We might, of course, take her to be lying about her belief, but I am assuming otherwise. It certainly appears that people *are* sometimes sincere, and understood to be sincere, in cases like this. Nevertheless, we cannot easily make sense of someone who agrees with everything that leads us to conclude that the Earth is spherical, but who then concludes that it is flat.

We might be tempted to suggest, as we did in the case of Homophobe, that Flat-Earther must simply have a different standard of belief formation from ours. This standard would, somewhat similarly, allow for the simultaneous endorsement of beliefs which we consider clearly incompatible. However, to make sense of Flat-Earther as someone who endorses such a standard, we must be able to understand at least something about *how* that standard leads her to believe as she does. We can understand this of Homophobe, since we understand that, by not caring in the same way as us about the relevant non-moral facts, he is able to coherently believe that homosexuality causes no harm, that prohibiting homosexuality causes harm, and that we ought to prohibit homosexuality. There appears to be no parallel standard for Flat-Earther which would allow her to coherently believe just what she believes.

Of course, we can understand how *some* people might believe in a flat Earth. For example, I take it that we could make sense of a religious fundamentalist whose holy book insists that the Earth is flat, and who endorses a standard such that we should believe anything written in that book.[4] The fundamentalist, we must presume, recognises that he ought to reject any beliefs which contradict his religious convictions, or at least that he ought

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[4] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing the question of why Flat-Earther cannot endorse a different standard of belief-formation whilst remaining comprehensible, and for suggesting the example of the fundamentalist.

to acknowledge the pressures of such contradictions on his beliefs, perhaps by adopting a belief that his faith requires that even contradictory propositions may be true.

In the absence of any beliefs like the fundamentalist's, however, we cannot see how *any* standard could allow Flat-Earther to reflectively endorse just those beliefs that she holds. She appears perplexingly oblivious to what seem like very obvious contradictions within her belief system. We can only make sense of her as believing that the Earth is flat *and* – to give just one example – that Columbus reached America while sailing to Asia, if we think that she has made a mistake *by her own lights*. We can of course allow that she has failed to recognize this. However, we must assume that, if she were diligent and honest enough, Flat-Earther would recognize that she has internally inconsistent, or otherwise defective, beliefs. If we do not assume this, then I do not see that we can interpret Flat-Earther as possessing these beliefs at all.

Clearly, then, there are some important disanalogies between these two cases. Homophobe is best understood as someone who simply adopts a standard of belief-formation which is different from ours, so that he forms a set of beliefs which we could not coherently endorse but which he can. We cannot understand Flat-Earther in any similar way, since there appears to be no standard of belief that *could* make her set of beliefs coherent, or otherwise such that we could understand how she could reflectively endorse them. We can only make sense of her as holding the beliefs that she holds if we think that she employs at least roughly similar standards to our own, such that she would recognize that her beliefs are defective by these standards if she were to reflect carefully enough.

Now, consider how we would respond if faced, not with *one* such opponent in each case, but with many millions. As Kelly (2011, p. 200) argues, although there is no simple rule to determine how much one ought to conciliate in the face of disagreement, one *should* conciliate wherever one finds that significant numbers of one's peers disagree, since this counts as higher order evidence that 'the bearing of the original, first order evidence is something other than what one initially took it to be'.

Clearly, however, our disputants may not always be our epistemic peers. In some cases, they might have obviously defective standards of belief formation. A defective standard of belief formation is just one that is such as to ensure that any beliefs formed in accordance with it are false. Where we disagree with people's beliefs, and where these beliefs are formed in accordance with defective standards, we can be confident that they are false beliefs, so that we have no reason to conciliate. We can usefully frame this point by saying that we ought to, and typically do, adopt a certain 'higher order norm', to use Gibbard's (1990, p. 168) useful phrase. A higher order norm is one which governs the acceptance of other norms. The relevant higher order norm here is: Treat any opposing belief to one's own as higher order evidence that one's own belief may be wrong, unless one has compelling evidence that the opposing belief has been formed in accordance with a defective standard of belief formation. Call this the 'Standard Norm'.

Even according to the Standard Norm, we very possibly ought to take *any* disagreement about any non-evaluative, stance-independent facts as some degree of evidence that we might be wrong. In most or all such cases, we must understand our opponent to be adopting roughly similar standards of belief formation to ours, or we will fail to make sense of them as holding beliefs at all. This was the moral of Flat-Earther. If we were to find that *most* people believed as Flat-Earther believes, then we would be compelled, on pain of finding them incomprehensible, to assume that we all share the same standard of belief formation, at least roughly, such that either they or we are wrong according to this standard. If our standard of belief formation is non-defective, then so too is theirs. Therefore, we must count their widespread belief in a flat Earth as higher order evidence that we misunderstood the bearing of whatever we took to be evidence that the Earth is spherical. Other things being

equal, the more people who disagree with us about any non-evaluative, stance-independent fact, the greater the higher order evidence that we are wrong, and so the more we should conciliate.[5]

However, in at least some cases of widespread pure moral disagreement, we are under no pressure to assume similar standards of belief formation. In cases like Homophobe, we simply understand our opponents as people who do not care as we do. Such people are, clearly, employing different evaluative standards – standards of *moral* belief formation – to our own. Given this, we cannot assume that if their beliefs are stable, then ours must be unstable or false. If many people believe as Homophobe believes, then we ought to accept this as evidence that people can stably believe as Homophobe believes. However, this is fully compatible with our own beliefs being both stable and true. If we want to know who among us is morally mistaken, then we must ask who among us has a defective standard (or, indeed, whether we both do). To answer this, we must rely on our own evaluative standards. We must ask whether we do, or should, approve of adopting our opponents' standards of evaluation.

Homophobe's standard is one by which it is permissible, granted all the relevant non-moral facts – including the pains caused by homophobia, and the harmlessness of homosexuality – to disapprove of homosexuality. Even allowing that there may be ways of improving my moral beliefs that I cannot imagine, the most cursory reflection on the relevant non-moral facts demonstrates to me that coming to adopt *this* standard could never improve my moral outlook. Why should the mere fact that many people disagree make me think otherwise? All my opponents can offer me are their fervent assurances that they see things differently from me, and that they approve of their moral standard, even as they recognize the same non-moral facts. Perhaps my opponents' beliefs *are* stable in this way but, if anything, this makes me find them even more repugnant. It does not suggest that my own beliefs are unstable, or false, or that there might be anything valuable to learn from my opponents. I should only treat this as evidence that my standard might be wrong if I think that I morally ought to conform to widespread or stable beliefs or standards, even where they are repugnant. Fortunately, like most people, I hold no such implausible belief.

Given any such assessment of Homophobe's standard, we should flatly disagree with anyone who shares Homophobe's beliefs. Our evidence suggests that we disagree with them because they have defective standards of moral belief formation. Believing this poses no problem for our understanding of our opponents as moral believers. Neither does it suggest that we might not share very similar belief-forming standards to theirs, beyond the moral domain. Therefore, this is what we *should* believe. Given this, the Standard Norm does not require that we treat this disagreement as evidence that we may be wrong.

The existence of even large numbers of people with beliefs that contradict our own cannot provide higher order evidence that we might be wrong in cases where they have formed these beliefs according to a defective standard. According to our best, and only, means of evaluating moral beliefs, it is clear that anyone who coherently endorses Homophobe's moral belief has a defective standard of moral belief formation. Therefore, we have no higher order evidence that our contrary belief might be false, no matter how many people disapprove of homosexuality.

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[5] An anonymous reviewer asks whether this claim suggests that atheists ought to conciliate in their belief that there are no gods, given that most people believe that there is at least one god. As a tentative answer, I suggest that religious believers, insofar as they have *faith* in religious matters, very deliberately adopt different standards of belief formation from non-believers for a carefully considered, relatively localised set of beliefs. Given this, atheists need not conciliate when they learn of such beliefs, since they can best understand believers as people who have faith, which they themselves do not. However, this is an interesting question, which deserves more consideration than I can give it here. I offer my thanks for bringing it to my attention.

This might seem to lead to a related worry for quasi-realism, of the kind that Enoch (2011) presses. Enoch denies that quasi-realists can allow for anything like moral steadfastness, because – he claims – they understand moral disagreement as a matter of conflicting preferences. Enoch (2011, p. 37) argues that, although one can justifiably 'stand one's ground' in cases of factual disagreement, one cannot ever justifiably insist on one's preferences over anyone else's. Therefore, he concludes, quasi-realism cannot allow that we could justifiably stand our ground in cases of moral disagreement.

However, as Sinclair (2014, p. 426) argues, Enoch misrepresents the quasi-realist's account of moral disagreement. While she allows that our moral judgments depend on our preferences, she does not, and need not, explain moral truth or disagreement in this way. We must rely on our attitudes and preferences to moralise, but this does not require us to argue that anyone else should care about our attitudes or preferences. The quasi-realist argues that, when we express disapproval towards homophobia, the truth of our belief that homophobia is wrong is grounded in our reasons for disapproving of it – such as the fact that it is harmful – *not* in our disapproval. If I argue that homophobia is truly wrong, then I do not argue that we should respect my preferences over yours. I argue that, for example, homophobia is harmful to many harmless people, and therefore impermissible.

There is no ethical problem about insisting, in the face of disagreement, that other people's wellbeing is important. Indeed, we are often entitled to stand our ground about matters of importance to us, not just in moral cases (Sinclair, 2014, p. 429). The quasi-realist can, therefore, consistently combine her account of moral disagreement with her steadfastness in Homosexuality.

Quasi-realism, then, explains why we are often rational to be morally steadfast in the face of pure moral disagreement. On the assumption that we frequently act as it is rational to act, quasi-realism is well placed to explain why we are so frequently morally steadfast in the face of pure moral disagreement. It suggests that morally steadfast behaviour is prevalent largely *because* it is frequently rational.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have focused on just two metaethical implications of moral steadfastness. I have argued that the prevalence of morally steadfast behaviour is problematic for some accounts of moral epistemology, as employed by some moral realists. I have also argued that, in light of the seeming rationality of moral steadfastness, quasi-realism is explanatorily preferable to any realism that entails the existence of stance-independent moral facts.

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