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# Conciliating to Avoid Moral Scepticism

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## ABSTRACT

A common worry about moral conciliationism is that it entails at best uncertainty about many of our moral beliefs and at worst epistemological moral scepticism. Against this worry, I argue that moral conciliationism *saves* us from epistemological moral scepticism and enables us to be confident in many of our moral beliefs. First, I show that only taking disagreements seriously as a threat to our beliefs allows us to utilise agreements in support of our beliefs (call this symmetry). Next, I argue that utilising moral agreements as an epistemic resource allows moral conciliationism to resist the potentially worrisome reduction in confidence of our moral beliefs. Taking the relevance of moral agreement into account, I argue that it is *anti*-conciliationism that must meet the challenge of epistemological moral scepticism. For this, I suggest that moral inquiry is best understood as a collective endeavour. If so, then agreement on our moral judgments is required to justify the confidence we have in many of our moral beliefs. However, by symmetry, this appeal is possible only if one accepts the conciliatory attitude towards disagreements. Hence, *accepting*, rather than rejecting moral conciliationism, is the way out of moral scepticism.

**KEYWORDS** Peer disagreement; moral disagreement; moral agreement; conciliationism; moral scepticism

## 1. Introduction

I believe that meat consumption is morally impermissible. At the same time, I acknowledge that a significant number of ethically capable people disagree: they believe that meat consumption is morally permissible.<sup>1</sup> Should this undermine the confidence I have in my belief?

The standard attitude towards cases of moral disagreement is that moral steadfastness – retaining one’s moral beliefs in the face of disagreement – is epistemically permissible or perhaps even required (cf. Elga 2007; Setiya 2010, 2012). Such steadfastness is opposed to moral conciliationism. According to moral conciliationism, the correct response to moral disagreement is to conciliate: acknowledging that

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a significant number of ethically capable people disagree with me about the moral status of meat consumption should reduce my confidence in the respective belief for I cannot discount my interlocutor's belief solely on the basis of the present disagreement. Many worry that moral conciliationism thus entails an epistemological kind of moral scepticism. Since moral disagreement is widespread and persistent, the conciliatory attitude seems to demand that we significantly reduce our confidence in many of our moral beliefs thus leading to said scepticism (cf. e.g. Christensen 2007; Feldman 2006a, 2006b; Kornblith 2010). If such scepticism is to be avoided, we should better reject moral conciliationism.

Vavova (2014) argues that the charge of a wholesale scepticism isn't quite warranted. She holds that conciliationism is committed only to agnosticism about *controversial* moral beliefs. However, many of our more basic moral beliefs are met with so much agreement that conciliationism is not committed to a reduction in confidence in these beliefs, thus admitting at best some sort of 'local' moral scepticism.

In this paper, I begin by investigating the theoretical foundations of this defence of conciliationism, arguing that it requires a claim about the *symmetry* between the epistemic significance of disagreement and agreements. Only taking disagreements seriously as a threat to our beliefs allows us to utilise agreements in support of our beliefs, thus conferring the certainty of the more basic moral beliefs that are met with a lot of agreement. Having established this symmetry claim, I argue that *only* moral conciliationism can therefore draw on the epistemic significance of moral agreements. The anti-conciliationist, by contrast, cannot draw on agreements in the same way to vindicate their moral beliefs. Thus, if there is any threat of moral scepticism, it is – surprisingly – to be found on the *anti*-conciliationist side. I suggest that moral inquiry is best understood as a collective endeavour. If so, appealing to agreements on our moral judgments is required to justify the confidence we have in our moral beliefs. However, by symmetry, this appeal is possible only if one accepts the conciliatory attitude. Hence, *accepting*, rather than rejecting moral conciliationism, is the way out of moral scepticism.

My defence of moral conciliationism here thus rests on a bigger conceptual issue – understanding the positions in the literature around disagreement not just as positions about disagreement, but the value of *testimony* in general, be the testimony in agreement or disagreement with prior beliefs. While I do not explore this underlying issue in more detail, I hope that it provides sufficient motivation to explore the debate around disagreement in this more open-ended inquiry regarding testimony in general.

Finally, let me be explicit that my concern here is solely epistemological. Sometimes, moral disagreement is also invoked as an argument for *meta-physical* moral scepticism. The persistence of moral disagreement is thought to be best explained by appealing to different ways of life rather than

disagreement about some moral reality (cf. Mackie 1977, 36). For the purposes of this paper, I set such worries aside. After all, the anti-conciliationist is worried that moral conciliationism might lead to *epistemological* moral scepticism. Accordingly, metaphysical moral scepticism most certainly is a non-starter for them.

## 2. Symmetry

An initial worry about moral conciliationism is that it might entail a wholesale epistemological moral scepticism. If moral disagreement is widespread and pervasive, affecting all or at least most of our moral beliefs, it seems that it might undercut our justification for holding moral beliefs entirely. In her 2014 paper, Vavova argues convincingly that such wholesale scepticism is not an outcome of any plausible version of moral conciliationism. She argues that there are many moral beliefs, especially our most basic moral beliefs, for which disagreements are rare and agreements much more prevalent (cf. Vavova 2014, 302).

I am sympathetic to this kind of approach for defusing the initial worry about a far-reaching scepticism. However, I think that the argumentative move Vavova is making merits further attention. Note that she is not just claiming that disagreements are rare for many of our moral beliefs, she is also invoking *agreement* as a counteracting force. The best explanation to ground this argumentative move, I submit, is an appeal to a symmetry between the epistemic significance we assign to disagreements and the epistemic significance we assign to agreements. The symmetry claim then holds that whatever the epistemic significance of disagreement, the same goes for agreement and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> I thus suggest understanding Vavova as arguing that any reduction in justification following from rare instances of disagreement about many moral beliefs is outweighed by the much more frequent agreement about these beliefs. Appealing to symmetry, the conciliationist thus has a resource to argue that there is no need to reduce our confidence in all of our moral beliefs given the significant amount of agreement on many of them.

Why think that symmetry holds? Both disagreements and agreements are concerned with the epistemic significance of an interlocutor's belief regarding a proposition you have already entertained. Thus, the setup of the two cases is symmetric. In both cases, you receive testimony regarding a claim you have already considered. Whether this testimony happens to align with your beliefs should be irrelevant for the epistemic significance you ascribe to it, because the level of trust in a particular piece of testimony depends on the antecedent trust in the testimony's source, in this case your interlocutor (cf. Fricker 2006, 600). When considering peer (dis)agreements, this claim is particularly plausible – after all, taking someone to be your peer just means

that you trust them as a source of testimony in general, to the point that you think they are as likely as you to get things correct. Only accepting symmetry allows you to take your peers *themselves* seriously as a source of evidence.

Though the symmetry claim has, to the best of my knowledge, not been explicated in the literature so far, I take it that it underlies Vavova's argument and is in fact prevalent even in the anti-conciliationist camp. For a very explicit example, consider Fritz' (2018) argument *against* conciliationism: because a wide backdrop of moral agreement is a good reason to trust strangers in moral matters, he argues, moral conciliationism is committed to significant reductions in confidence in the face of moral disagreement, thus leading to objectionable spinelessness (cf. Fritz 2018, 166). Such dependence of the epistemic significance of disagreements on the epistemic significance of agreements requires the assumption of something in the spirit of the symmetry claim.

In this section, I consider various objections to the symmetry claim. Given that the symmetry claim has not been explicated in the literature so far, the objections I discuss draw on discussions which are not originally intended as objections to symmetry. I begin with two objections claiming that disagreements have substantial epistemic significance while agreements lack it. After dealing with these, I discuss two objections that challenge symmetry the other way around. These aim to undermine the epistemic significance of disagreements while leaving the epistemic significance of agreements intact.

Since the symmetry claim has a broader scope than just *moral* agreements and disagreements, the examples I draw on in this section are not restricted to the moral domain. The symmetry of *moral* agreement and disagreement is just a special case of a more general symmetry claim about agreement and disagreement.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.1. Belief

Let us begin by considering potential problems for symmetry alleging that sometimes agreements lack epistemic significance while disagreements do not. Is the simple fact that you already believe something a potential symmetry breaker when it comes to agreement and disagreement on that belief? Roughly speaking, if you believe a proposition, any agreement on it might seem epistemically vacuous – responding to the agreement you simply continue to believe the proposition. In contrast, when encountering a disagreement, your doxastic states may change: you can hold on to the belief but question it, you can give the belief up, etc.

One way to substantiate the present intuition is by drawing on the default and challenge model of justification. Following this model, you are entitled to believe some proposition until a justified challenge to the proposition comes up (cf. e.g. Williams 2001, 149). This model has

most plausibility when applied to basic sources of knowledge such as perception but may also include intuitions. If so, then on many views according to which intuitions play a central role in moral epistemology, it also has application in the moral realm. Huemer's phenomenal conservatism, cited in support of his intuitionism, is one such example (cf. Huemer 2005, 99). Following phenomenal conservatism, one is entitled to hold a moral belief merely based on one's intuition as long as the belief remains unchallenged. If one considers moral disagreements to constitute such a challenge, then symmetry fails. While moral disagreements have epistemic significance in that they challenge your beliefs, the same does not hold for moral agreements. After all, or so the argument goes, one's justification for the initial belief stems from one's intuition, not potential agreement on the belief.

To see whether this objection actually threatens symmetry, let us consider more closely the reasons for why decreasing one's confidence in a belief seems justified in such cases of disagreement. Suppose I am very confident in my belief that *modus ponens* holds. Since I take myself to be in a good position to evaluate the issue (otherwise my confidence would not be as high), I take myself to be capable with respect to this issue. Naturally, then, I also expect other capable people to come to the same conclusion. Following up on such an agreement with a capable agent, nothing much about my evidential status changes. After all, I expected capable people to agree with me, I took my interlocutor to be capable and they agreed with me. Thus, the agreement at hand confirms the hypothesis I already had a high confidence in – it lacks substantial epistemic significance. In contrast, in cases of disagreement, my evidential status changes quite drastically. Again, I believed that capable people would agree with me, I took my interlocutor to be capable but nonetheless they ended up disagreeing with me. Hence, some of my prior hypotheses must be false. Either it is false that capable people come to my conclusion or my assumption that my interlocutor is capable is false (of course, the conciliationist should take the first of these options). Either way, the disagreement has substantial epistemic significance.

It should become clear by now, however, that the reason for the differing epistemic significance of agreement and disagreement is not, as initially suggested, due to the very nature of agreement and disagreement. Rather, it is due to my prior *expectations* about the likelihood of agreements and disagreements. If I come to believe a proposition, I should also form further beliefs, one being that capable people will agree with me. Hence, I have already priced in that capable people will agree with me when forming my initial belief. Thus, if someone whom I take to be capable agrees with me, my evidential basis changes little. After all, I *expected* my interlocutor to agree with me. In contrast, if said person disagrees with me, my evidential basis changes significantly – it is for this very reason that my belief is challenged.

However, the difference in epistemic significance is not inherent to agreements or disagreements. Had I expected a *disagreement*, its epistemic significance would have been minor while an agreement would have had more epistemic significance. Suppose, for example, that you have a discussion about a hot political issue with someone from the other side of the aisle. You fully expect the two of you to disagree since you disagree with almost all claims of your interlocutor on the issue at hand. However, to your surprise, you find them agreeing with you. Given your prior expectations, you must now either modify your estimate of their competence on this issue or begin questioning your own belief. Long story short, the agreement has substantial epistemic significance because you did not expect its occurrence.<sup>4</sup>

My expectations about the likelihood for an agreement or a disagreement thus affect their respective epistemic significance. If I expect them, their epistemic significance is low, if I do not, their epistemic significance is high. This suggests that in neutral cases, where I have no expectation about whether I will encounter an agreement or a disagreement, both agreements and disagreements are of equal epistemic significance – and this is just the most basic version of the symmetry claim we are out to defend.

Given these considerations, however, we can now formulate the symmetry claim somewhat more rigorously. The claim is not simply that all agreements and disagreements are of equal epistemic significance. Rather, there is nothing about agreements and disagreements *themselves* that gives one or the other more epistemic significance. Evidently, external factors, such as expectations about the likelihood for an agreement or a disagreement might have an impact on their epistemic significance. However, the mere fact of agreement or disagreement does not give rise to a difference in epistemic significance. The symmetry claim is thus to be understood as a *ceteris paribus* claim. Other things equal, there is no difference in the epistemic significance of agreements and disagreements.

## 2.2. Reasons for Belief

So far, we have focused on the mere fact of agreement or disagreement. However, instead of drawing on these as the symmetry breaker, one might propose drawing on the nature of the *reasons* underlying the beliefs that lead to agreements and disagreement. Let us distinguish between reasons for and reasons against a belief (cf. Snedegar 2018). If someone disagrees with you, it seems that you will usually learn of a new reason against your belief – the reason that led them to come to the opposite belief. In contrast, agreements can occur also when the agreeing party relies on the same reason to justify their belief. If so, they do not provide you with a new reason for your belief. Thus, symmetry fails.<sup>5</sup>

Suppose that my belief in the impermissibility of meat consumption is due to my belief that abstaining from meat consumption minimises our impact on ecosystems (cf. Fox 2000). Imagine I encounter an agent whom I take to be ethically capable and they agree with me that meat consumption is morally impermissible. When inquiring about their reasons for holding this belief, they cite exactly the same reason I relied on to begin with. Evidently, I do not have two reasons going in favour of my belief now – the reasons we cite are identical, in similar cases they may at least overlap (cf. Maguire and Snedegar 2020; Nair 2016). At any rate, the epistemic significance of the agreement is significantly reduced. But the same does not hold for disagreements, or so the argument goes. For suppose the agent I encounter disagrees with me, arguing that we have a fundamental right to choose what we consume, including meat. If I take this reason on face value, I now have a reason for and a reason against my belief. The disagreement is of epistemic significance – it provides me with a new reason while the agreement does not. And if the epistemic significance of agreement is thus undermined while the epistemic significance of disagreement is not, then symmetry fails.

While I think that the characterisations of these cases are correct so far, I do not think that symmetry fails automatically. Rather, the examples show that there are different kinds of agreements and disagreements. I show this in the following by providing examples of disagreements that have equal epistemic significance as the agreement considered above (for lack of introducing new reasons) as well as examples of agreements that are just as epistemically significant as the disagreement considered above (because they introduce new reasons). Let me begin with the latter, more obvious point.

It is of course possible to agree with someone on a proposition, even though they provide different reasons for believing the proposition than you. Suppose the concurring agent I encounter argues that meat consumption requires us to treat animals as mere means which is morally impermissible (cf. Korsgaard (2012) for such a position). Assuming that I did not consider this reason before, I am now provided with a new reason for my belief. Hence, these kinds of agreements might well have substantial epistemic significance.

There are, then, at least two kinds of agreement. First, there are agreements relying on the same source – the epistemic significance of these agreements may be significantly weakened since they merely provide you with higher order evidence that you appreciated the reason in question correctly. Second, there are agreements drawing on distinct sources – the epistemic significance of these agreements is not under threat from the present argument since you are provided with a new reason for.<sup>6</sup> Note that this distinction also has a desirable normative upshot: on this account, typical



echo chambers do not provide you with a substantial justification for your beliefs because only agreements providing new reasons do so.

I have by now demonstrated that there are two kinds of agreement, one of which plausibly has substantial epistemic significance, one with weakened epistemic significance. If all kinds of disagreements carry equal epistemic significance, symmetry still fails.

Though a disagreement cannot, as it were, *repeat* one's initial reason as in the first kind of agreement, it can still be *about* the initial reason. Suppose for example that my disagreeing interlocutor, after being provided with my reasoning relying on the conversation and restoration of ecosystems, argues that they have considered exactly this reason, but took it to provide no support for the belief that meat consumption is morally permissible. My conservative approach to ecosystems, they take it, rests on some kind of a naturalistic fallacy. On this question, then, the connection I drew between the reason at hand is dismissed by my interlocutor.<sup>7</sup> Such disagreements invite you to reconsider whether or not you have appreciated the respective reason correctly. The disagreement indicates that you may have gone wrong at some point.

We are now in a position to fully appreciate the potential asymmetry. If you believe some proposition, you usually have a reason for doing so. Agreements can thus take two forms, they either repeat your initial reason or they provide you with a new reason to believe the proposition. The former lacks substantial epistemic significance while the latter has it. In contrast, disagreements always seem to carry substantial epistemic significance. Either they give you higher-order evidence that you may have failed to appreciate the initial reason correctly or they give you a new reason against the proposition in question.

The threat of asymmetry thus comes down to whether there is a difference in epistemic significance between agreements repeating your initial reason and disagreements threatening your interpretation of your initial reason. However, refining the worry in this way undermines its initial force. For the initial charge was that some agreements give you nothing new while disagreements always take something away. Comparing the cases of (dis)agreement which either support or threaten your appreciation of a particular reason does not present this strong intuitive difference. Both the agreement and the disagreement affect the support for the reason you already have considered. While the agreement provides you with no new reason for, neither does the disagreement provide you with a new reason against. Rather, the agreement supports the connection you drew between reason and proposition in question while the disagreement threatens it. Both such agreements and disagreements are higher-order evidence about your already present reasons. While the agreement does not add a new reason, neither does the disagreement. If at all, it threatens your interpretation of the already present reason, but the reverse is true for the agreement – it supports your

interpretation of the reason. And these are exactly the cases the traditional peer disagreement literature tends to focus on.

Similar remarks apply to (dis)agreements about how to correctly weigh the reasons for and against a proposition. The degree to which this higher-order evidence increases or decreases your confidence in the (dis)agreed upon weighing of reasons may differ depending on how confident you are in its connection to the supported proposition. Crucially, however, the epistemic significance does not differ for cases of agreement and disagreement. The intuitive difference between the two cases is best explained by way of your expectations, as I argued in the previous section. If disagreements have substantial epistemic significance, so do agreements.

### **2.3. Permissivism**

Let us now turn to objections challenging symmetry in the other direction. These objections maintain that disagreements can lack substantial epistemic significance even if agreements do have substantial epistemic significance.

A major motivation for conciliationism stems from the conviction that for any set of evidence, there is a uniquely rational doxastic attitude for any proposition. This conviction is generally referred to as the uniqueness claim (cf. e.g. Feldman 2006b; White 2005). Roughly, given uniqueness, disagreements on the ground of shared evidence entail that at least one party to the disagreement has failed to form that unique rational doxastic attitude. However, though widespread, the acceptance of uniqueness is by no means trivial. The contender is permissivism, which denies uniqueness. According to permissivism, at least sometimes, given a set of evidence, there is more than one rational doxastic attitude for any proposition (cf. e.g. Schoenfield 2014).

Permissivism might undermine symmetry as follows. According to permissivism, disagreements are not necessarily an indicator for a mistake in rationality on behalf of a party to the disagreement – after all, there may be multiple rational doxastic attitudes towards the proposition in question. Hence, according to permissivism, there are disagreements with no or only weak epistemic significance. However, there is, at least on the face of it, no reason to assume that permissivism likewise undermines the epistemic significance of agreements. After all, permissivism is usually not understood as an ‘anything goes’ position. Hence, even if permissivism is true, agreements are epistemically significant. They provide some (defeasible) evidence that one has formed one of the available rational doxastic attitudes.

In responding to this objection, it will be useful to carefully consider what epistemic significance means. On a naïve understanding, new evidence is epistemically significant if and only if it either weakens or strengthens the justification for the belief you hold. However, while the disagreement does not weaken or strengthen the justification of your current belief on the

permissivist account, the disagreement still provides you with new information. After all, you receive significant information about the set of evidence: not only is your own belief a rational doxastic attitude towards it, also the belief of your interlocutor may be such.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the disagreement still carries epistemic significance in the sense that it affects the justification you have available for that belief. While it does not undermine your current belief, it affects your justification for other rational doxastic states towards the proposition. Your current doxastic state towards the proposition is justified and the doxastic state of your interlocutor may be as well.

Interestingly, not even accepting an ‘anything goes’ version of permissivism threatens symmetry (cf. Christensen 2016, 587–588). For while accepting such an extremely permissive position might entail that disagreements really are epistemically insignificant (since anything goes, learning that some particular belief goes as well is not new information), it likewise entails that agreements are epistemically insignificant. Learning that there is agreement on your belief carries no new information about the justification of said belief.

Thus, permissivism is consistent with symmetry. This is a desirable result for two reasons. The first is obvious: accepting permissivism does not threaten symmetry. The second is more interesting. If symmetry holds both if one accepts uniqueness and if one accepts permissivism, then accepting symmetry does not entail any further commitment in this debate. While accepting symmetry evidently entails some commitments (after all, it is a non-trivial claim), it is non-committal in the debate around uniqueness and thus does not require prior acceptance of one of the major motivations for conciliationism.

#### **2.4. Extreme Disagreement**

There is one class of disagreements that even committed conciliationists usually consider to be void of epistemic significance: extreme disagreements (cf. Christensen 2007). One way to undermine the symmetry claim, then, is to argue that a significant number of *moral* disagreements are such extreme disagreements. If so, moral disagreements lack epistemic significance while the epistemic significance of moral agreements can be retained and, accordingly, symmetry fails.

To get an intuitive grip on extreme disagreements, consider the following case:

Suppose that five of us go out to dinner. It’s time to pay the check, so the question we’re interested in is how much we each owe. [...] I do the math in my head and become highly confident that our shares are \$43 each. Meanwhile, my friend does the math in her head and becomes highly confident that our shares are \$450 each. (Christensen 2007, 199, my emphasis)

Extreme disagreements, then, are such that the response of your interlocutor is, for some reason or other, out of the realm of the options you would seriously consider. In the above example, the share of each person cannot possibly exceed the total bill, \$450 is thus a non-starter. You may think that the same is true in many cases of moral disagreements. Consider, for example, the belief that kicking puppies for fun is morally permissible. Adopting this position is a similar non-starter as the \$450 in the above example. A disagreement of this kind is thus intuitively void of epistemic significance.

Note first that, since there are difficult moral questions in which several outcomes are at least on the ballot, not *all* moral disagreements can be extreme. Drawing on extreme disagreements to undermine symmetry will therefore work only for a limited class of disagreements (as much can readily be admitted by the proponent of this symmetry breaker). However, even this restriction is not sufficient to deny symmetry. For if extreme moral disagreements are only those in which your interlocutor is, from your point of view, fundamentally mistaken about a moral issue, then you have little reason to think of them as ethically capable – after all, they are, by your own lights, *fundamentally* mistaken (cf. Vavova (2014) for this line of argument).<sup>9</sup> To generalise, the more extreme the disagreement, the less reason you have to think of your interlocutor as ethically capable. However, moral conciliationism was never meant to apply to all moral disagreements but only to disagreements with ethically capable agents. Ironically enough, then, the more extreme the disagreement, the less adjustment to your beliefs conciliationism recommends.

The reason for the lack of the epistemic significance in these cases is not the extremeness of the disagreement, but the ethical incapability of your interlocutor. Hence, the underlying rationale to neglect the epistemic significance of extreme disagreements is to neglect the epistemic significance of disagreements with ethically incapable agents. Plausibly though, the same idea applies to agreements as well: the less ethically capable you take your interlocutor to be, the less epistemic significance your agreement with them has.

The relevant contrast to standard extreme moral disagreement is thus not just any moral agreement but a moral agreement with an ethically incapable agent. Notably, however, symmetry *does* apply here: the epistemic significance of both disagreements and agreements decreases with the ethical capability of the interlocutor. Hence, drawing on extreme disagreements to reject symmetry does not work. Still, this discussion clarifies once more that symmetry does not entail that *all* agreements and disagreements are of equal epistemic significance. Rather, the epistemic significance of both agreements and disagreements depends (and depends to the same degree) on the ethical capability of your interlocutor.

For each objection, then, the underlying intuition can be traced back to a source which, if properly investigated, fails to support the charge against

symmetry. Thus, symmetry holds – other things equal, whatever the epistemic significance of disagreement, the same goes for agreement and vice versa.

If moral conciliationism holds, then moral disagreements carry epistemic significance – but, given symmetry, moral conciliationism also entails that moral agreements carry epistemic significance. This is why arguments such as the one Vavova presents in defence of moral conciliationism work. Similarly, by symmetry, if the anti-conciliationist claims that moral disagreements lack epistemic significance, they are also committed to the claim that moral agreements lack epistemic significance. This observation will be the first building block of the positive argument against anti-conciliationism to be explored in the next section.

### 3. Moral Agreement

By investigating the symmetry claim underlying the defence of moral conciliationism, we have seen that moral *agreements* might play a more important role than they have typically been assigned in the debates around peer *disagreement*. In this section, I suggest that utilising moral agreement as an epistemic resource can save us from epistemological moral scepticism and that failing to utilise it in this way may, under certain assumptions, lead us to said scepticism. This discussion becomes possible because of the symmetry claim: I have shown that it is not necessary to discuss the epistemic significance of moral disagreements directly – it is equally promising to discuss the epistemic significance of moral agreements.<sup>10</sup>

It may seem that establishing symmetry is of little value for the discussion around moral conciliationism and epistemological moral scepticism. After all, arguing for moral conciliationism initially required an argument to the extent that moral disagreements have substantial epistemic significance. All the symmetry claim has established is that moral conciliationism can also be established by showing that moral *agreements* have substantial epistemic significance. However, this difference is not to be neglected. The anti-conciliationist attitude towards cases of moral disagreement is to deny their normative force. In contrast, as I hinted at when first introducing the symmetry claim, anti-conciliationists regularly point out the prevalence of moral agreements, drawing on their epistemic significance in order to show that moral conciliationism cannot simply disregard ‘inconvenient’ moral disagreements. Consider, for example, Fritz’s 2018 note on why moral conciliationism entails a dispute-independent reason to trust even total strangers about morality:

Although the practical importance of reaching moral consensus tends to draw our attention towards areas of dispute, most people probably share the vast

majority of their moral beliefs. [...] When we note that other people generally seem to be right about a wide range of moral questions, we gain reason to believe of any given stranger that [they] will be right about a wide range of moral questions. (Fritz 2018, 108, my emphasis)

Fritz draws on this result to show that moral conciliationism cannot simply disregard moral disagreements in the way anti-conciliationism supposedly can. Fritz's appeal to moral agreement, however, also shows that even anti-conciliationists tend to assign epistemic significance to moral agreements.

Therefore, the route via the epistemic significance of moral agreements is preferable to the route via the epistemic significance of moral disagreements. For in the case of moral agreements, we find at least some common ground when it comes to their epistemic significance. Hence, we need not refute the anti-conciliationist at the very outset of the project.

### **3.1. Moral Conciliationism Does Not Entail Scepticism**

Recall the initial charge of the anti-conciliationist. Supposedly, moral conciliationism leads to epistemological moral scepticism because moral conciliationism assigns substantial epistemic significance to moral disagreements and such moral disagreements are widespread. However, as Vavova notes, this argument succeeds only if moral disagreements are so widespread that they affect even our basic moral beliefs (cf. Vavova 2014, 302).

To see why the charge against moral conciliationism fails, let us first investigate the effects of symmetry on moral conciliationism. According to symmetry, the epistemic significance of disagreements and agreements are, other things equal, the same. If so, then a proper characterisation of moral conciliationism entails not only that moral disagreements are of substantial epistemic significance, but that moral agreements are likewise of substantial epistemic significance.

If, as the anti-conciliationist holds, the epistemic significance of moral disagreements is such that, following moral conciliationism, it can lead to epistemological moral scepticism, then the reverse should hold for moral agreements. Following moral conciliationism, moral agreements are ascribed such epistemic significance that they can lead to stable moral beliefs, i.e. avoiding epistemological moral scepticism.

Thus, for the charge against moral conciliationism to be successful, the anti-conciliationist needs to argue not just that moral disagreement is widespread but also that moral conciliationism cannot draw on moral agreements to avoid scepticism. However, as we have seen in establishing symmetry, it is not clear why moral conciliationism should be unable to draw on moral agreements. After all, in assigning epistemic significance to moral disagreements, moral conciliationism can (and should) similarly assign epistemic significance to moral agreements.

While moral conciliationism does advise a sceptical attitude about moral beliefs that are subject to persistent and widespread disagreement (this is the initial charge of the anti-conciliationist), the sceptical attitude is not principled. If the disagreement about the moral belief in question resolves, it is possible to draw on the new-found agreement as a justifying factor in favour of believing it. Given that there seems to be at least some moral progress in society, I do not think that this resort to future agreement is naïve (cf. Shafer-Landau 2003, 16–18). While accepting moral conciliationism may mean accepting uncertainty about some moral beliefs (given that they are subject to disagreement), it also offers a way out of the uncertainty.<sup>11</sup>

Appealing to the difference between transitional and terminal attitudes is instructive to clarify this point. Transitional attitudes are part of the *process* of reasoning while terminal attitudes are *conclusions* of reasoning (cf. Staffel 2019). Moral conciliationism is best understood as advising suspending belief *for the time being*. Yet, the suspension of judgment is transitional, not terminal – the moral conciliationist offers a way out of the suspension of judgment. Because of symmetry, moral conciliationism has a good explanation for the confidence we have in many of our moral beliefs – the substantial epistemic significance of moral agreement.

And such moral agreement is indeed abundant. Note first that a certain amount of moral agreement seems to be required for the proper functioning of a society. There are, as e.g. Vavova observes, arguably many basic moral beliefs on which we converge, ‘that pain is bad, that we should take care of our children, etc’ (Vavova 2014, 302). Next, as indicated in the earlier passage I quoted from (Fritz 2018), even though we tend to *focus* on moral disagreement, both in the political realm as well as in the philosophical literature, this is not an indication that the amount of moral agreement is substantially limited. In fact, it may be that the worries we have about moral disagreement show that we are used to a substantial backdrop of moral agreement.

Even drawing on different moral theories – e.g. utilitarianism, virtue ethics or Kantianism – that are, or so it seems, in clear disagreement, does not help much. While there are deep disagreements about the justification of our moral beliefs, the disagreements rarely translate to first-order disagreements:

For example, both Mill and Kant can agree that we shouldn’t kick puppies. Mill would think this for the standard utilitarian reasons: puppies are sentient creatures, pain is bad, etc. Kant seems to think we shouldn’t kick puppies because it corrupts our moral character and increases the likelihood of us kicking morally relevant creatures like humans. But still, he does think we shouldn’t kick puppies. (Vavova 2014, 323)

Again, it may be that we tend to focus on the disagreed upon first-order questions (such as trolley problems and the like), but this is mostly to bring out intuitions about the differences in justification of the theories. The actual first-order disagreement between (plausible) moral theories is limited.

### **3.2. Moral Inquiry as a Collective Enterprise**

So far, I have explicated an underlying assumption employed in the defence of moral conciliationism (symmetry) and then argued that symmetry ensures that epistemological moral scepticism does not follow from moral conciliationism. The new focus on *agreements* rather than disagreements, now allows us to turn this defence into a positive argument against the contender of moral conciliationism. After all, symmetry shows that the denial of the epistemic significance of disagreements goes hand in hand with a denial of the epistemic significance of agreements.

What, then, if we reject the epistemic significance of moral agreements? After all, if symmetry holds, this rejection entails that moral disagreements are likewise void of epistemic significance – so perhaps the anti-conciliationist can nonetheless uphold many of their moral beliefs (while they cannot draw on moral agreements, they seemingly do not ‘need’ to, given that there is no reduction in confidence due to moral disagreements in the first place).<sup>12</sup>

I now aim to show that – at least on the plausible conception of moral inquiry as a collective enterprise – accepting the epistemic significance of agreements is in fact crucial. This culminates in a reversal of the initial charge against moral conciliationism. I argue that epistemological moral scepticism can *only* be avoided if we assign moral agreements substantial epistemic significance. If so, then rejecting moral conciliationism may very well lead to epistemological moral scepticism.

Let me begin on an anecdotal note. Contemporary academic moral theorising is quite obviously a collective enterprise. All standard methods of research involve more than just an individual ethicist. We read about other’s moral views, we respond to these published views, we incorporate aspects of their views into ours. We present our views at conferences, hoping for comments on their plausibility and ultimately aim to publish our research to an interested audience. Presumably, all of this is done not merely because it is our job or because we expect some form of eternal glory. Really, we are interested in what other people think about our position, hoping to learn from them, etc. Our practices of moral theorising are inseparable from these social aspects.

Once we turn to morality ‘on the ground’, it becomes even more obvious why it would be a mistake to think of morality without this collective aspect. The moral domain is vast, moral questions are difficult and almost everyone participates in moral inquiry. Similar to the academic circles, we care about



other's moral views, how they perceive our moral convictions, etc. The vastness and the complexity of morality also mean that we quite often rely on others in making moral decisions. In short, both moral practice 'on the ground' as well as academic moral theorising are inextricably linked to certain social practices.

Of course, none of this conclusively shows that morality is necessarily a collective enterprise. We could, after all, be mistaken in our practice. If you think that we can figure out morality by ourselves, from our armchair as it were, these considerations will probably not convince you of the opposite. However, I am content with providing these considerations as a reason to think that it is at least extremely plausible that morality is closely linked to social practices. And insofar as we think that these practices have epistemic value, we should be sceptical about the claim that agreements (and indeed, many other forms of testimony) lack epistemic significance. After all, much of our moral practices either depend on or aim towards such moral agreement. If anti-conciliationism binds you to the armchair, all the better for my argument here.

You might be tempted to claim that such agreements are of epistemic significance only if they provide us with new reasons for a particular view – it is not the pure fact of agreement, but rather the reasons themselves that do the epistemic work here. Agreements that provide us with new reasons are significant because of the underlying (new) reasons. It then comes down to the question whether the pure fact of moral agreement (i.e. those agreements that do not provide new reasons) can have epistemic significance. The task is therefore to argue that the pure fact of agreement can carry epistemic significance.

In the following, I assume a weak form of foundationalism for morality: some moral knowledge is basic, i.e. such that it can provide you with knowledge prior to knowing the reliability of the source, the prime example of course being moral intuitions (cf. Cohen 2002, 310). Since agreement on such intuitions provides a mere alignment of intuitions, there are no reasons over and above the agreement themselves to be gained.

Apart from contradicting our moral practices, assuming that agreements on moral intuitions are epistemically insignificant commits us to believing that our own moral intuitions are in some sense special, more likely to be right than those of others. For suppose you were asked to justify a particular moral intuition of yours. If such intuitions provide basic knowledge, then simply providing your intuition is, as a first step, sufficient. However, once you take into account that others may report conflicting intuitions you either have to give up on your intuition (because a justified challenge came up) or claim that you are nonetheless justified in the belief your intuitions supports. If you cannot make this latter move by drawing on agreement, the only alternative is to claim that your intuitions take some form of precedence over those from others. Seriously taking the relevance of agreements into account

allows us to assign the same relevance to other's intuitions as to our own and simultaneously remain entitled to hold some of the corresponding intuitions (namely those with sufficient agreement). Really, then, we should have trust in our (*plural*) intuitions rather than our (*singular*) intuitions. Our trust in our individual intuition may only be justified derivatively.

I have argued that taking moral agreements to be epistemically insignificant is both in contradiction with our moral practices and likely to lead to counterintuitive consequences in the case of basic moral knowledge such as moral intuitions. On the understanding of morality as a collective enterprise that I have sketched taking moral agreements to be epistemically insignificant is implausible.

Taking this conceptualisation of morality as a collective enterprise seriously may not just render moral conciliationism plausible, but indeed *necessary* to avoid epistemological moral scepticism. For given the importance of the collective level, rejecting moral conciliationism leads us dangerously close to epistemological moral scepticism. Given symmetry, the anti-conciliationist must reject *both* the epistemic significance of moral agreement and moral disagreement. Accordingly, they cannot draw on the collective level to justify their moral beliefs (or at least, they cannot do so for *basic* beliefs as I explore them here – they can, of course, still draw on the *reasons* provided by other agents). Without drawing on collectively justified intuitions, however, we have no reason to think that *our* intuitions are the reliable ones. Without drawing on (dis)agreements, we are on our own even when it comes to a moral reality that is not of our own. Thus, we must remain sceptical if we attribute no epistemic significance to the testimony of others, including their agreements and, by symmetry, disagreements. Hence, insofar as we think of morality as a collective enterprise, denying the epistemic significance of agreements on moral intuitions entails epistemological moral scepticism.<sup>13</sup>

Conciliationism in general and moral conciliationism in particular were initially introduced as positions on what to do in the face of disagreement. The same, of course, goes for its competitors in the anti-conciliationist camp. What the discussion in this paper has shown is that this restriction in scope is too narrow. The positions in the debates around disagreement are plausibly not just understood as being concerned with disagreement, but with the relative value of other's moral testimony in general – including disagreement and agreement. It is this shift in focus that allows the defence of moral conciliationism I put forward.

Moral anti-conciliationism undercuts the justification for many of our moral beliefs by removing moral agreement as a justifying factor. Rejecting moral conciliationism seemed plausible at first because of how extreme moral conciliationism appeared. However, in accepting that moral beliefs must be justified entirely without reference to both agreement and

disagreement, the anti-conciliationist goes even further. In particular, they lose moral intuitions as a basic kind of moral knowledge – a result that renders moral conciliationism a rather innocent position by contrast. If avoiding epistemological moral scepticism is desirable, adopting rather than rejecting moral conciliationism is the way to go.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the charge of epistemological moral scepticism against moral conciliationism is unsuccessful. For this, I have first established a symmetry claim of the epistemic significance of agreements and disagreements. Drawing on this symmetry claim, I argued that moral conciliationism offers a plausible way out of the suspension of judgment on our moral beliefs – agreements. So, moral conciliationism does not entail epistemological moral scepticism.

In the final section of this paper, I further suggested that moral conciliationism may indeed be *necessary* to avoid epistemological moral scepticism. I suggested that moral inquiry is best understood as a collective enterprise. Insofar as you agree with this conception, we should assign moral agreements epistemic significance. Symmetry then commits us to assigning equal epistemic significance to moral disagreements.

Since there are two sets of premises doing the crucial work in my arguments, there are roughly two ways to resist my argument. First, one might reject the symmetry claim and argue in particular that disagreements lack epistemic significance while agreements do not. Second, one might accept the symmetry claim but argue that both moral disagreements and moral agreements are void of epistemic significance. I hope to have made a convincing case that neither of these options is particularly attractive.

#### Notes

1. A 2010 study finds that there are about one and a half billion vegetarians worldwide, only 75 million of which are vegetarians by choice (cf. Leahy, Lyons, and Told 2010). Arguably, a significant number of non-vegetarians by choice believe that meat consumption is morally permissible, many of whom are likely to be ethically capable.
2. Of course, epistemic significance comes in many ways. For my purposes here, I am interested in a notion of epistemic significance that has an effect on your *justification* for the (dis)agreed upon belief. The symmetry claim thus holds that agreements affect your justification to the extent that disagreements affect it and vice versa. In the following, I often use the qualifier ‘substantial’ to mark the difference between moral conciliationism and the anti-conciliationist. Roughly, the epistemic significance of (dis)agreements is substantial if (dis)

agreements usually have noticeable effects on the justification of our beliefs – it is this noticeable effect that gets conciliationism out of the charge of scepticism. In contrast, for the anti-conciliationist, the justification of our beliefs is usually not noticeably affected by (dis)agreements.

3. Of course, one may hold that symmetry holds in general, but not in the moral domain. The burden of proof, however, is on those upholding this position – they would have to provide a (non-circular) argument as to why the moral domain should not be subject to symmetry when other domains are.
4. Psychological experiments confirm this extra-attentiveness to information that contradicts our expectations whether in agreement or disagreement (cf. Sperber and Mercier 2017, 210 for an overview of some such experiments.)
5. In offering this explanation as to why symmetry might fail, it may seem that we are leaving the territory of discussing the epistemic significance of agreements and disagreements *themselves*, discussing only the underlying reasons instead. However, if we could show that disagreements *in general* provide new reasons while agreements fail to do so, we have nonetheless shown something about the nature of agreements and disagreements.
6. In a footnote, Vavova alludes to this kind of agreement and notes that their epistemic significance derives from the ‘independent support for our judgments about the [beliefs]’ (Vavova 2014, 332).
7. In other cases, the reason in question might even be taken as a reason against by my interlocutor. In the above example, they might for example believe that humans are in fact *meant* to shape and modify ecosystems in a way that suits their needs best. My reason for would be their reason against.
8. Of course, this does not hold for just any interlocutor. Only the disagreement of epistemically capable agents provides you with this information. However, this does not undermine symmetry. Likewise, only the *agreement* of epistemically capable agents affects your justification in a positive way.
9. Many commentators think that such reasoning is in violation of the independence criterion. If so, then *extreme* disagreements deserve no special treatment and the attempt to draw on them to undermine symmetry fails from the outset. An alternative proposal as to why extreme disagreements are epistemically insignificant comes from Lackey and draws on the prior confidence one has in the belief (cf. Lackey 2010). Again, extreme disagreements are rendered epistemically insignificant. However, as I argued earlier, the same goes for agreements on beliefs in which you were highly confident to begin with.
10. The focus on agreements also brings up an interesting implication for one particular version of anti-conciliationism, the so-called total evidence view (cf. Kelly 2010). On this account, one ought to take into account both one’s evidence prior to a disagreement and the fact of disagreement, thus sometimes allowing to discount one’s interlocutor *on the basis of* the present disagreement (i.e. denying the independence criterion conciliationism subscribes to). Focusing on agreements, denying independence has the surprising consequence that we can sometimes ‘count’ an interlocutor’s opinion on an issue solely on the basis of our agreement with them on that same issue. This seems worrisome given that it might enable us to ‘overproduce’ peers whose agreement we might then take to support our initial belief.
11. These considerations strongly suggest that there is some sense in which numbers matter when it comes to agreements and disagreements. For an overview of the potentially connected worries, cf Frances and Matheson (2019), section 6.

12. In the literature on moral testimony, some hold that moral testimony fails as a reliable source of evidence, either because we cannot identify reliable testifiers in the moral domain (cf. McGrath 2009) or because of the high stakes in moral matters (cf. Hopkins 2007). However, most worries about moral testimony arise not due to such *unavailability* concerns, but rather due to *unusability* concerns. According to these, moral testimony ought to be avoided because actions based on moral testimony are *morally* (cf. e.g. Nickel 2001 or Hills 2009) or *psychologically* (cf. e.g. Howell 2014, Fletcher 2016 or Callahan 2018), but not epistemically, sub-optimal.
13. An anonymous referee has noted the similarity of my argument here to the argument Elga (2007) presents in defence of conciliationism in general. This argument has been subject to disagreement (cf. e.g. Enoch 2010; Wedgwood 2010). Holding that it is okay (or even required) to form a fundamental trust into one's own mental states that is not appropriate for mental states of others. If this criticism is successful, the arguments in this paper show that it also has a further, perhaps undesirable, consequence. Used as a defence against disagreements, it gives the critic what they want. However, seeing that we similarly would have to reject the relevance of agreements with others on basic beliefs, it would also entail that any further agreement would not affect our level of confidence in the belief at hand (for our trust in our own mental states is much more fundamental).

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