

Moral Skepticism

INTRODUCTION

All the standard arguments for global skepticism apply *mutatis mutandis* to moral skepticism. Whatever reason there is to doubt we know anything is reason to doubt that we have moral knowledge. Yet our moral views invite skepticism even if global skepticism is false. One doesn't need to be a skeptic about everything to have serious doubts about moral knowledge.

The grounds of moral skepticism are legion. They are found in the evidently irreconcilable moral disagreements that are a familiar fact of life. They are found in the difficulty people often have in articulating, let alone explaining in any precise way, what they mean when they say that something is morally wrong or a moral duty. They are found in the fact that, as it seems, people might have all the same non-moral beliefs about (say) some course of action, about the alternatives, and about their effects, and yet still intelligibly disagree about whether so acting is morally permissible. They are found in the recognition that moral arguments are not something that might even conceivably be settled by empirical investigation. They are found in the striking extent to which an appeal to intuitions or gut feelings (that not everyone shares) are the only "argument" people have for the moral views they embrace. And they are found in the ways in which peoples' moral views look to be more a reflection of private interest or cultural practice or even biological forces, than a recognition of independent moral facts.

These familiar observations offer significant grounds for skepticism, notwithstanding the strength of peoples' moral convictions and their readiness to sacrifice in the name of those convictions. There is a long history of moral skeptics appealing, in different ways, to these observations. Along the way, a remarkable variety of positions have emerged.

One way to understand the variety of views that count as versions of moral skepticism is to relate them to a standard account of the nature of knowledge, moral and otherwise. According to this account, knowledge is justified, true, belief. The idea is that a person will not count as knowing something in particular if she does not believe it; or if, though she believes it, it isn't true; or if, though she believes it, and it is true, she is not justified in believing it. This is regularly offered as a general account of knowledge and is not supposed to be specific to moral knowledge. Nonetheless, specific versions of moral skepticism can be sorted according to whether they deny (i) that people have moral *beliefs*; or, granting moral beliefs, (ii) that such beliefs are *true*; or, granting that people might have moral beliefs, and that some of them might be true, (iii) that people ever have an appropriate *justification* for those beliefs.

In what follows, I will canvass the arguments people have offered for thinking that we don't have moral beliefs, that if we do, none of them are true, and that, even if some might be true, we are never justified in thinking of any of them (or, at least, any that are substantive) that they are true.

DO PEOPLE HAVE ANY MORAL *BELIEFS*?

The suggestion that people do not have moral beliefs might seem difficult to take seriously. It seems clear that people do sometimes sincerely believe that, for instance, racism is morally wrong, or that justice demands that we treat others as equals. These claims and others seem to express moral beliefs that at least some people genuinely have. In fact, such beliefs sometimes seem to be among people's strongest commitments.

Still, a powerful strain of moral skepticism has its roots in denying that people have moral beliefs. These moral skeptics grant that people sometimes genuinely accept the positions they advocate. Their distinctive claim is that moral convictions, no matter how strongly held, are not *beliefs*. Instead, these skeptics argue, people's moral views are a reflection of their affective, and not their cognitive, attitudes. To hold a moral view, they argue, is a matter of looking at some things with approval and others with disapproval, or of being motivated to do some things and not others, or of hoping others will behave in one way rather than another. It is not a matter of having a belief with a distinctively moral content.

According to these "non-cognitivists" (as they are usually called), once we distinguish a person's beliefs from her other (non-belief) attitudes, and, specifically, once we recognize the distinctive role of her preferences, of her desires and aversions, and of her approvals and disapprovals, none of which are themselves beliefs, we'll see (they argue) that a person's moral convictions are among these non-belief attitudes. Having a moral view is not a matter of having a belief.

The apparently necessary connection between a person's moral commitments and what she is motivated to do is, the most influential argument for thinking that moral attitudes are not *beliefs*.

The argument goes back at least to David Hume who emphasized the distinctively practical role of moral thought. [see Hume 1978] It starts with the observation that if a person is utterly unmotivated to pursue, promote, or protect what she claims to be good or right (or to oppose and work against what she claims to be bad or wrong) her claims will have been shown not to express her genuine views.

The argument goes on to claim that beliefs are all, in themselves, motivationally inert. Simply knowing which belief a person might have doesn't by itself (the argument goes) tell us how the

person will be motivated. To know how someone might be motivated we need to know what preferences she has. This marks a sharp contrast, the argument goes on, between a person's moral views, on the one hand, and her beliefs, on the other, since in knowing a person's moral views we do know that she will be motivated in certain ways. This contrast shows, the argument concludes, that a person's moral views are not among her beliefs.

There are various ways one might push against this argument. For instance, one might deny that in holding a moral view, one is, *ipso facto*, motivated at all one way or the other. Even if normally coming to hold that something is good or right has a motivational impact, there certainly seem to be cases where a person sincerely recognizes that something is morally right and yet shows no motivation to do it. Or one might argue that the motivational impact of our moral views actually establishes that, at least in some cases, knowing a person's beliefs does tell us about that person's motivations.

A different argument for thinking people lack moral beliefs highlights the difficulty people have in identifying and articulating just what they mean in saying that something is right or good or wrong or bad.

Following G. E. Moore, many philosophers argue that any attempt to define moral terms is bound to fail. [Moore 1903] They note that for any proposed definition (say, of 'good' as 'pleasant' or 'the object of desire' or 'conventionally accepted' or of 'right' as 'conducive to happiness' or 'approved by God' or 'consistent with society's rules') one can intelligibly ask, of whatever met one's preferred definition, whether it really was good or right. That these are intelligible questions seems to show that (i) thinking something satisfies the proposed definition and (ii) thinking that thing is good or right involves thinking two different things. Yet if the definitions were successful, the argument supposes, the thoughts would be one and the same (just as thinking something is a triangle is one and the same as thinking that it is a three side plane figure).

The worry is not about any particular proposed definition. Rather, it seems, any attempt to define moral terms by appeal to events or properties that are testable or in other ways cognitively tractable, will leave open an important question: are things that satisfy the definitions actually good or right? Even if we end up answering "yes", our being able intelligibly to raise the question seems to establish that the proposed definitions fail as definitions. They each fail to capture a distinctive and important element of what we are doing in making moral claims.

What, though, is this missing important element? Non-cognitivists hold that it is not some additional cognitive component, over and above what is captured by some definition. Instead,

they maintain, the extra element is some non-cognitive attitude that we are expressing in making a moral judgment.

This suggestion fits naturally with the motivation argument, since it returns us to the view that sincere moral judgments are tied to some noncognitive attitude (that many have argued is a motivating attitude). The two arguments fit together so well that their coincidence is reasonably taken as an additional consideration in favor of both.

Importantly, while non-cognitivists reject the idea that we have moral beliefs, and so (on the assumption that knowledge entails belief) reject the idea that we have moral knowledge, they can and often do offer an account of what we are doing in saying of someone that she has moral knowledge: we are expressing our approval of her moral commitments. Just as our moral thought and talk is used to express our attitudes, so too (on this view) is our thought and talk about knowledge and justification. In counting someone as knowing something, or in characterizing her as being justified, we are, on this view, not reporting a fact or expressing a belief, but instead we are expressing some non-cognitive attitude of our own concerning her. [Blackburn 1993, Gibbard 1990]

DO PEOPLE HAVE ANY *TRUE* MORAL BELIEFS?

Without denying that it may be impossible to define moral terms in any way other than by appeal to other moral terms, many hold that we are nonetheless expressing beliefs, and purporting to report facts, when we make moral judgments. We are not simply expressing our likes (and dislikes), we are claiming that those things are right, or good (or wrong, or bad, and these claims are properly evaluated as true or false in light of the way the world actually is. On this cognitivist view, liking (or disliking) something shouldn't be mistaken for is not the same as thinking it good (or bad). The latter involves forming a belief about the thing, perhaps a belief that justifies our liking (or disliking) it, but in any case a belief that is distinct from, and something over and above, the feelings in question.

Thinking that people have moral beliefs, though, is compatible with thinking all the beliefs are false. As a result, one might embrace cognitivism and yet advance an error theory, according to which no moral beliefs are true. Error theorists grant that we do have moral beliefs and that, in making moral claims, we are purporting to report facts about how the world is, morally. In that respect, it is less radical than non-cognitivism. In another respect, however, it is much more radical, since error theorists hold that our moral thought is fundamentally mistaken, whereas the non-cognitivists challenge our understanding of what we are doing in making moral claims, but may leave our making those claims utterly unchallenged. [Mackie 1977]

A useful parallel here is found in the modern view of the Greek Gods. In ancient Greece, people had beliefs about Zeus and the other Olympian Deities, beliefs that were strongly held and tremendously influential. Yet we now see those beliefs as fundamentally mistaken, no matter how sincerely held and no matter how salutary in their effects. Other useful parallels are found in, for instance, current scientists' rejection of beliefs concerning phlogiston, and the now common rejection of the idea that there are witches with occult powers. As we see things, particular claims about Zeus' desires, or phlogiston's effects, or the magical impact of a witch's incantation, are false because they presuppose the existence of things that don't actually exist - Zeus, phlogiston, occult powers, respectively.

Similarly, error theorists about morality argue that particular moral claims, which they grant often express sincerely held beliefs, are all false because they presuppose the existence of things that don't exist. Different error theorists trace the mistake to different specific presuppositions that, they argue, are part and parcel of holding a moral view. But they all maintain that our moral thought and talk presupposes the presence of something that, simply put, does not exist.

According to some, in holding a moral belief we are presupposing authoritative standards for human behavior. And, they go on to argue, we there are no such standards, so we should reject all the beliefs (i.e. all moral beliefs) that commit us otherwise.

According to others, we are presupposing desire-independent reasons for acting in certain ways, such that people have reason to act in certain ways, regardless of their desires. And, they go on to argue, there are no such reasons, so we should reject all the beliefs (i.e. all moral beliefs) that commit us otherwise.

According to still others, we are presupposing the existence of an all powerful and loving creator who sets the standards for our behavior, or establishes reasons for us to act, or in some other way provides what has to be in place for any moral claims to be true. And, they go on to argue, there is no such creator, so we should reject all the beliefs (i.e. all moral beliefs) that commit us otherwise.

In whichever way the details are worked out, error theorists maintain that we should reject all moral beliefs false on the grounds that, in holding them, we are committed to something that does not exist.

Clearly, the error theorist's position is only as strong as her grounds for thinking (i) that the presuppositions she identifies are ones to which we are committed in holding a moral belief, and (ii) that the relevant presupposition is false. Predictably, cognitivists who reject the error theory regularly argue either (i') that the claims about what moral beliefs presuppose get things

wrong or (ii') that, while they are right, the presupposition is satisfied. In taking the first line, the argument is that error theorists saddle those with moral beliefs with commitments that are not theirs to bear. In taking the second line, the argument is that the relevant commitments are, contra the error theorists, commitments we have, on balance, grounds for thinking they are satisfied.

Working through these issues is nicely complicated and involves weighing evidence that certain presuppositions are in play, evidence that the presuppositions are not satisfied, and evidence that people might have gone so far wrong. All of this gets balanced, in the process, against the evidence that some things really are right or wrong, good or bad.

But this last bit of evidence needs to be handled carefully. The error theorists are challenging the claim that anything is right or wrong or good or bad. So, to the extent contrary evidence presupposes what is at stake (as presumably most of our moral evidence in favor of particular moral claims, does) there is a pressing worry about begging the question. Of course, error theorists acknowledge, if cruelty is always wrong, then evidence that someone has done something wrong is found in their having been cruel. But the claim that cruelty is always wrong, no less than the claim that a particular person did something wrong, presupposes, they will argue, just what is in question.

However, the conviction that some things are genuinely right or wrong, good or bad, provides impetus for showing either that the purported presuppositions are not actually being made, or that they can be vindicated. That fact understandably structures how people set about defending their moral beliefs as not actually undermined by the error theorist's challenge.

In the process, error theorists and their opponents alike work to figure out what people are claiming in saying that something is right or wrong, good or bad, since arguments for or against certain candidate presuppositions turn on what is involved in these claims. These debates introduce discussion of whether the putative moral facts would have to be something supernatural, or whether they might properly be identified with, or constituted by, natural entities or properties. And these debates force a discussion as well about what might constitute successful definitions of our moral terms, about whether such definitions are necessary or desirable, and about how it is that our language and our thoughts might come to be about various things in the way they apparently are.

In the context of a discussion of skepticism, the important point is that if the error theorists are right, we lack moral knowledge (assuming that knowledge entails justified true belief) because none of our moral beliefs are true. Importantly, in making their argument, error theorists are not claiming the no one has, or has ever had, justified moral beliefs. Error theorists argue that

we have grounds for rejecting all moral beliefs as false, on the grounds we have for thinking that they all have false presuppositions. Yet their position is consistent with holding that people who lack the evidence we have, or have different evidence, might well be perfectly justified in holding the moral beliefs they do. Their point is that, justified or not, we have reason to think such beliefs are actually false.

ARE ANY MORAL BELIEFS *JUSTIFIED*?

But what would it take for someone's moral beliefs to be justified?

An attractive answer to this question, provided by "foundationalism," starts with the idea that a belief is justified if but only if (i) there is evidence for it or (ii) it is, in some way, self-evident (or not in need of evidence, though able to provide evidence for other beliefs, or, at least, not such that there could be any good evidence against it). And the answer continues with the thought that beliefs that fall in (i) do so thanks to being properly related to those that fall in to (ii). (Foundationalism doesn't require that the foundational beliefs be dubitable, corrigible, or even true. They simply need to be able to justify other beliefs without having to secure support from other beliefs.)

Foundationalism brings two questions to the fore. Which beliefs are of type (ii)? (Here talk of self-evidence, certainty, indubitability, etc. looms large.) And: What does it take for a belief to count as being "properly related" those beliefs? (Here talk of entailment, evidential relations, explanations, and inductive support, looms large.) Among foundationalists, there is a great deal of disagreement as to how to answer these two questions.

In thinking specifically about moral beliefs, explanatory relations have become especially salient. [See Harman 1977 and Sayre-McCord 1988] The problem is that the truth of our moral beliefs seems not to play any explanatory role in our understanding of our own experiences, nor of what happens in the world, nor why. Even when evil people do horrible things to virtuous people, we can have (in principle) a full explanation of what the evil people have done and why, and what happens to the virtuous people, and how they suffer, all without having to appeal to our moral beliefs at all. Psychology, sociology, biology, and physics, in some combination, provide the explanation. While adding talk of evil and virtue may let us categorize those involved, it seems not to help us explain what has happened. Similarly, we might find ourselves repulsed by the behavior of the evil person and indignant at the treatment the virtuous person has suffered. While we might be tempted to say that our being repulsed is explained by the person's evil nature and our indignation is explained by undeserved suffering, our reactions are fully explained by appeal to our having the moral beliefs we do, without having to suppose those beliefs are true. We would have been repulsed and indignant, having

believed the person evil and the sufferer virtuous, even if, as a matter of fact, our beliefs were false. According to many moral skeptics, this point holds generally and shows that our moral beliefs are explanatorily impotent.

This is going just a bit fast. After all, the truth of our moral beliefs would, it seems, explain the truth of other moral beliefs. The wrongness of cruelty explains why a person who is cruel is evil, and the virtue of a victim explains why that person suffering is undeserved. Perhaps. Yet, the skeptics point out, all of our moral beliefs are being called in to question. So these explanatory relations *among* our moral beliefs, are of no justificatory value unless some of our moral beliefs are independently justified. Our moral beliefs could be justified, they insist, only if either they bear some other relation to privileged beliefs, or they themselves fall in to the privileged class. But, according to the skeptics, neither is plausible.

So, for instance, our moral beliefs would bear an appropriate relation to privileged beliefs if they were entailed by those beliefs. Thus, if the fact that something was pleasant entailed that it was morally good, or if the fact that some course of action maximized happiness entailed that it was morally right, then as long as we were justified in believing certain things were pleasant or certain courses of action maximized happiness, our beliefs concerning what was morally good or right could be justified.

Yet Moore's observation that there is always an open question when it comes to whether something that satisfies a non-moral description (as, for instance, being pleasant) satisfies as well a moral description (as, for instance, being morally good), renders contentious (to say the least) the claim that there are entailment relations between the content of non-moral beliefs and the content of moral beliefs. [Moore 1903, Sayre-McCord 1997]

Inductive relations seem no better placed to provide justifications for our moral beliefs. After all, inductive relations supporting particular moral beliefs require already having on hand, as justified, some moral beliefs that we can use as the basis for the induction. That simply shifts back to those beliefs, leaving us unable to make a legitimate induction on their basis unless they are themselves justified.

If, as it appears, explanatory, entailment, and inductive relations exhaust the relevant possibilities, there seems no hope for the justification of our moral beliefs unless some moral beliefs count as epistemically privileged – as self-evident, or indubitable, or in some other way such that we are both justified in holding them and able to rely on them in justifying other moral beliefs. Indeed, virtually all foundationalists, end up taking this view. (The skeptics, of course, deny that any moral beliefs qualify, while the non-skeptics maintain that some do.) The

challenge facing non-skeptics, at least those who accept foundationalism, is to show that some moral beliefs qualify as epistemically privileged.

Some moral beliefs might immediately come to mind as not possibly false – for instance, that committing a murder is morally wrong. But what seems to guarantee this truth – its being an analytic that murder is wrong – seems to guarantee as well its triviality. For such beliefs to justify other moral beliefs, we need another substantive belief, for instance, that a certain act was a murder (and not a justified killing). But the justification of these beliefs is just what is at issue, and the (trivial) truth of various analytic claims seems to be of no help with them.

One might argue that the available analytic truths are much more surprising and complicated than this example suggests. One might hold too that discovering their truth is a kind of revelation even to those who are sophisticated in their moral thinking. Yet, surprising or not, complicated or not, a revelation or not, analytic moral truths, considered alone, still apparently leave us with no justification for specific substantive moral beliefs. For this reason, the ambition of those who ground moral epistemology in analytic truths involves finding successful analyses that trade in epistemically unproblematic non-moral terms. Only then, relying on the analyses, and relevant, and justified, non-moral beliefs, might the moral beliefs in question inherit epistemic credentials.

If, for instance, a correct analysis reveals that something is morally wrong if in doing it one is acting contrary to the recommendation of one's ideal advisor, and if we can have a justified view of what one's ideal advisor would recommend, then we could have a justified belief about what is wrong. The challenge, the skeptic will press, is to show that the terms of the analysis themselves have the required epistemic credentials.

Alternatively, putting putative analytic truths aside, one might defend some substantive moral beliefs *a priori*, even if not analytic. Thus, for instance, one might maintain, as an *a priori* truth, that an action is wrong if and only if the agent could not consistently will that everyone act on the same grounds she is taking as sufficient for her.

Against such views, a moral skeptic presses two challenges. The first challenge is to show that the claim is, in fact, an *a priori* truth. The second is to show that our beliefs concerning what an agent might consistently will are on a better footing, epistemically, than the moral claims concerning the wrongness of an action seem to be. Predictably, bearing each of these burdens is a real challenge.

Hoping to meet both burdens, moral intuitionists argue that there are some substantive moral claims that all who are morally competent, clear-headed, and unbiased, can be brought to recognize as true. Moreover, they maintain, the credentials of these claims are comfortably on

a par, epistemically, with the rules of logic and the axioms of mathematics . As the intuitionists emphasize, the rules of logic and the axioms of mathematics admit of no more proof, nor do people think they need more proof, than is found in the fact that those who are logically or mathematically competent, clear-headed, and unbiased, can “see” their truth. The reflective faculties of humans, no less than their sensorial faculties, are, when properly used, sources of information about the world. [Ross 1930]

Thus, for instance, they suggest that we are justified in believing that, other things equal, promises ought to be kept, and that (again) other things equal, if possible, we ought to help those in need. We are justified in believing these things not because they help us explain our experiences, nor because they are analytic truths, but because, on reflection, those who morally competent, clear-headed, and unbiased, see their truth. Once such claims are on hand, the intuitionists note, we can justify other moral beliefs by appeal to them. So while most of our moral beliefs are not themselves directly intuitive – our moral world is far too complex for that – moral intuition provides the fundamental truths that we can use to justify our other moral beliefs.

Moral skeptics, though, highlight that what strikes people as intuitive, when it comes to morality, so regularly reflects how they happen to have been raised, and what their interests are, that there is a persistent, and seemingly well grounded, suspicion that what gets valorized as intuitive is really simply what one is unwilling to reject.

More generally, moral skeptics press, there are no substantive moral claims that are unchallengeable and so none that are not in need of some evidence or support. Yet that suggests, they hold, that no moral beliefs are properly seen as epistemically privileged in a way that would allow them to serve as a foundation for our other moral beliefs. And if no moral beliefs are foundational (i.e. appropriately epistemically privileged), and no set of exclusively non-moral beliefs can alone provide a justification for our moral beliefs, then no moral beliefs are justified at all. This argument holds even if some of our moral beliefs are, in fact, true. The problem here is not that there are no moral truths, but that even if there are such truths, we apparently have no reason whatsoever to think that we have got them right.

Putting things this way brings us back to the explanatory challenge. Unless the truth of our moral beliefs figures, at the very least, in an explanation of why we hold the beliefs we do – unless we have grounds for thinking that our moral beliefs have been and are responsive to the (moral) truth – we have reason to worry that our moral views simply free-float from the moral facts (assuming there are such facts).

This worry is amplified by the extent to which psychology, sociology, political science and evolution, with appeals to self-interest, false consciousness, political influence, and genetic advantage, seem in some combination to offer compelling explanations of our moral beliefs all, it seems, without ever giving us reason to think any of them are true.

In order to establish that our moral beliefs are responsive to the moral facts we must justify our view that the facts are one way rather than another. Eschewing an appeal to intuitions, and the claim that some substantive moral claims are epistemically privileged in the way foundationalists demand, those who reject skepticism offer a variety of arguments in favor of some substantive position or another. Thus, for instance, Kant offers a transcendental argument for the categorical imperative, while Mill defends hedonism on the grounds that our view of the desirability of our own pleasure commits us to acknowledging anyone else's like pleasure as equally desirable (even if it is not equally desired). Others appeal to our capacity to engage in practical reason, or to some inescapable feature of our nature, arguing that it commits us to accepting some principle or other. [Korsgaard 1996] Still others find arguments for substantive moral claims in our need for shared standards for cooperation, or our commitment to mutual respect, or in the capacity of certain standards to explain and justify our more particular moral judgments. [Gauthier 1986; Scanlon 1998; Rawls 1971].

Of course, in offering such arguments (in the attempt to show that our beliefs are responsive to the truth), we are supposing that they are themselves sensitive to the truth. A skeptic will charge that, in doing so, these defenses all assume, illegitimately, that some of our beliefs are right.

Interestingly, according to many, moral beliefs are not the only ones that suffer this problem. In fact, it seems, attempts to establish that any contingently true beliefs are appropriately sensitive to the facts they concern will implicitly or explicitly appeal to other beliefs about those very facts. After all, it is only if we have those facts right that we can show that our beliefs are appropriately sensitive to the facts. But we are then presupposing that (some of) our beliefs are appropriately sensitive to the facts when we try to establish that they are.

Those who embrace global skepticism often press this point and rely on it in arguing that virtually all of our beliefs are unjustified, with the result that we lack knowledge not simply of morality but of the external world, of other minds, even of our own experiences. At the same time, many who reject global skepticism embrace this point too and then take it as grounds for thinking that in some way or other the foundationalist has misunderstood what is required for justification. In particular, they reject the idea that a belief can be justified only if it is either self-evident (or otherwise epistemically privileged) or justified by appeal, ultimately, to such beliefs. Instead, they maintain, we can succeed in justifying a particular belief by appeal to

another, without supposing we can get a perspective on our beliefs that allows us, from outside (so to speak), to show that our beliefs are responsive to the facts. Such a perspective is, in principle, unavailable, they argue, so if there is justification at all, ever, it must not require our having succeeded in taking this perspective.

With this in mind, coherentists about justification argue that how justified our beliefs are – moral beliefs, no less than beliefs about the taste of coffee or the effects of penicillin or the fuel economy of a car, or whatever – is dependent on, and a reflection of, how they are related to the other things we believe, with there being no need for any of the beliefs to be epistemically privileged in the way a foundationalist requires.

This suggestion meets with a familiar objection that is right in the point it makes, but that, in the process, reveals a common misunderstanding of what the coherentist holds. The objection is that the extent to which beliefs happen to hold together is no evidence that they are true. Indeed, for any set of coherent beliefs, it seems easy to imagine an alternative set that is just as coherent, yet incompatible. A piece of fiction need be no less coherent than a historical treatise. That means that one cannot reasonably offer, as evidence of the truth of one's beliefs, that they are coherent. Coherence is not evidence of truth. The misunderstanding here is in thinking that a coherentist offers coherence as evidence of truth. She doesn't, or at least shouldn't. The coherentist's proposal is, or should be, that while (relative) coherence is not evidence of truth, it is a measure of the strength of the evidence the person has. The idea is that each person's evidence for whatever she might be considering is found in the contents of her other beliefs. The more the contents of her beliefs support some claim, the more coherent the claim is with her beliefs and the more justified she is in believing it. [Sayre-McCord 1996]

Coherentism takes as given, but not as privileged, whatever beliefs we find ourselves with. It then sees the process of testing, refining, and justifying our beliefs as a matter of seeing how the various things we believe hang together, putting ourselves in place to gather more information (which becomes available as we form new beliefs), and refining and rejecting various claims in light of our evidence. As the skeptic has pointed out, none of the beliefs count as unchallengeable. Yet, contrary to the skeptic's claim, in the face of challenges, a person is justified in appealing to, and indeed has no recourse but to appeal to, whatever she does believe.

This of course leaves open the possibility that a person's justified beliefs, even those that are extremely well justified, might turn out to be false. Justification is no guarantee of truth on the coherentist's view. But that does not mean that a person had no reason to think of her justified beliefs that they are true – she has all the reason provided by her other beliefs. Each of these

beliefs may be challenged, but each is also in principle something that might meet the challenge.

While the coherence theory of justification is meant to account for how our scientific theories and our common sense beliefs about the world might be justified even though they are neither self-evident (nor otherwise epistemically privileged) nor supported by beliefs that are, the account applies directly to moral beliefs as well. To say that is not, of course, to say that our moral beliefs will, on the coherentist account, turn out to be justified. That cannot be determined *ex ante* and depends on seeing whether, and how, our moral (and other) beliefs hang together, putting ourselves in a position to gather more information, and refining and rejecting various claims in light of our evidence. Coherentism makes sense of how we might intelligibly discover that our moral beliefs are appropriately responsive to the facts, without thereby ensuring that they are. Far from it.

Part of what makes moral skepticism a serious challenge is that, as we consider the full range of what we take ourselves to know – about how moral convictions are shaped and changed, about how the world operates more generally, and about how we might gather information effectively -- we find grounds for suspecting that our moral beliefs do not cohere well with our other beliefs. At the same time, our moral convictions are so central to our understanding of ourselves and others that coming to grips with them, either as justified beliefs, or as unjustified beliefs, or as convictions not properly seen as beliefs at all, is a challenge we cannot reasonably ignore.

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