Spring 1-1-2018

From Epistemic to Moral Realism: an Argument for Ethical Truth

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FROM EPISTEMIC TO MORAL REALISM: AN ARGUMENT FOR ETHICAL TRUTH

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
2018
This thesis entitled:
From Epistemic to Moral Realism: An Argument for Ethical Truth
written by Spencer Jay Case
has been approved for the Department of Philosophy

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract: This dissertation is a development of the argument for moral realism advanced by Terence Cuneo (2007) and Nathan Nobis (2005). I call it the “Epistemic Argument for Moral Realism.” It proceeds as follows: epistemic realism is true; if epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is true; hence moral realism is true. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of the argument and its significance. In chapter 2, I argue in favor of epistemic realism indirectly – thereby supporting the first premise of the Epistemic Argument – by arguing against the two forms of epistemic anti-realism that I take to be the most plausible: normative error theory and epistemic instrumentalism. I argue that normative error theory is self-defeating, and that epistemic instrumentalism cannot do justice to our intuitions about the authority of epistemic reasons. Over the course of chapters 3 and 4, I provide three independent arguments for the “Parity Premise,” the claim that if epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is also true. Cuneo and Nobis argue that the best arguments for moral anti-realism overgeneralize to impugn epistemic realism; since rejecting epistemic realism is absurd, we should reject the best arguments for moral anti-realism. I agree with their reasoning; however, I also want to show that the truth of moral realism follows from the truth of epistemic realism. Finally, in chapter 5, I argue against normative pluralism, the view that all normative judgments are relative to normative domains, rather than being absolute. This is important because normative pluralism needs to be rejected if we are to establish the claims made in the preceding chapters.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My thesis is that moral realism is true. Although I intend to give a convincing philosophical argument for this position, I should confess that I think I would accept moral realism even in the absence of any such argument. I am compelled by the thought that there is a moral dimension to reality to which we should be attuned and I am unable to believe that this is simply a projection of my own social emotions or something that my society has constructed like money. Unfortunately, this has more to do with my perception of evil than my perception of goodness. I believe that there are objective truths about right and wrong because something has to make it true that genocide, slavery, terrorism, gang rape, murder, animal cruelty, torture, revolutionary violence, war crimes, tyranny, imperialism, environmental degradation, fraud, show trials, engineered mass starvation, child abuse and bullying are wrong. I’'m not sure that I would be so convinced that goodness exists were it not for all the badness in the world.

What is the point of offering a philosophical defense of moral realism if I already believe it’s true in advance? I might be in the position of someone who has had a religious experience, and so is completely convinced that God exists, but who nevertheless wants to see, out of pure curiosity or for evangelistic purposes, whether one of Thomas Aquinas’s arguments for the existence of God is sound. But my actual reason for undertaking this project is that I have doubts about this conviction, and I want to see how far I can go to demonstrate to myself that moral realism is true. Of course, certainty is not something that philosophy generally
affords. If Descartes proved anything to me, beyond that I can be certain of my own existence, it is that there are not many things beyond this about which I can be so certain, and probably nothing of great philosophical significance. That being said, I would be satisfied if I could succeed in placing moral realism on a firmer epistemic foundation. The argument I will defend is as follows:

**Epistemic Argument for Moral Realism**

1. Epistemic realism is true.

2. If epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is true.

C: Therefore, moral realism is true.

Here I define epistemic realism and moral realism and provide an outline of what is to follow.

1. **Realism in General**

Before we consider epistemic and moral realism, it’s worthwhile to consider realism generally. Some philosophers are pessimistic about the prospects of finding a satisfactory general account of realism. For instance, Crispin Wright says

If ever there was a consensus of understanding about “realism,” as a philosophical term of art, it has undoubtedly been fragmented by the pressures exerted by the various debates – so much so that a philosopher who asserts that she is a realist about theoretical science, for example, or ethics,
has probably, for most philosophical audiences, done little more than to clear
her throat. (1992, 1)

There is some truth to what Wright says in that the term “realism” has
become quite a thin label for a philosophical position (compare “neo-liberalism” in
politics). Nevertheless, I think that he overstates matters and I will attempt to
provide a satisfactory account of general metaphysical realism, of which moral
realism and epistemic realism are forms.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord presents a bare bones account of realism about a
domain of discourse that has only two criteria: “(1) the claims in question, when
construed literally, are literally true or false (cognitivism) and (2) some are literally
true. Nothing more” (1988, 5). On his account, there are only two ways for a domain
of discourse to fall short of realism: reject that sentences within a domain of
discourse attempt to describe reality (i.e., accept non-cognitivism), or hold that such
sentences attempt to describe reality, but uniformly fail (i.e., accept error theory).
Both kinds of moral anti-realism have been defended, though defenders of both
views typically find ways of preserving ordinary language and intuitions about
morality. Often these are quite elaborate.

A.J. Ayer, an early pioneer of moral non-cognitivism, maintained that value
statements are “not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of
emotion which can be neither true nor false” (1935, 62). One problem with this view
is that it seems to leave no room for genuine moral disagreement, which seems to be
all around us. Charles L. Stevenson, another non-cognitivist, attempts to accommodate moral disagreement by distinguishing between disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude. An example of the latter would be one person shouting “Go Yankees!” and another shouting “Yankees – Boo!” Although neither outburst is either true or false, we can make sense of the claim that the people making these outbursts are in some sense disagreeing. Moral disagreement is like this, according to Stevenson (1967, Ch. 2). Non-cognitivists have labored to smooth out other counterintuitive implications of their view. Simon Blackburn combines a non-cognitivist account of the assertability of moral statements with truth minimalism, according to which “‘p’ is true if and only if p” (1998, 75-77). This enables the non-cognitivist to say that moral statements can be true although they lack propositional content. Blackburn and other sophisticated non-cognitivists have further attempted to show that non-cognitivists can explain how moral claims are preserved through logical inferences, the so-called “Frege-Geach problem” (Blackburn 2006, 244-252).

Moral error theory is compatible with total normative error theory, the idea that all normative statements are truth-apt and all of them are false (or, if there are more than two truth values, that no non-trivial moral statements are true). Few, however, adopt these very strong and counter-intuitive positions. An exception that I discuss in chapter 2 is Bart Streumer (2013, 2017). Most moral error theorists accept instrumental normativity while finding moral normativity suspect. J.L.

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1 For an overview of the Frege-Geach problem, see Schroeder (2008).
Mackie famously argues for the subjectivity – not the non-existence – of values on the grounds that “objective prescriptivity” is unacceptably “queer” (1977, 15-25, 38-42). Since morality is presumed to be objective, this gives him grounds for being a moral error theorist without being a normative error theorist. Richard Joyce, following Mackie, objects to the inescapability of moral demands on the grounds that we can make sense of a moral skeptic who simply refuses to adopt the moral perspective (2003, 30-52). He writes: “Moral discourse... is a house of cards and the card at the center bottom has “categorical imperative” written on it” (2003, 177).

Jonas Olson (2014, 117), Christopher Cowie (2016, 115-6), and Stan Husi (2014, 424) also identify categoricity, or objective authority, as the problematic feature of moral facts.

Somewhat surprisingly, moral error theorists also make significant efforts to preserve moral language and practice. For example, Joyce defends moral fictionalism. On his view, we can have instrumental reasons to retain moral discourse – which is descriptive rather than expressive, as the expressivists maintain – despite there being nothing in the world that moral discourse describes. The difference between ordinary moral discourse and what Joyce recommends is that for Joyce, statements within moral discourse are merely pretense assertions (2003, 175-231). Olson thinks Joyce goes too far in his revisionism, and instead recommends what he calls “moral conservationism.” He proposes to compartmentalize his moral skepticism and carry on as if moral common sense were correct: “conservationism recommends moral belief in morally engaged and
everyday contexts and reserves attendance to the belief that moral error theory is true to detached and critical contexts, such as the philosophy seminar room” (2014, 192).

Both of these views face serious challenges. To Joyce I would ask: could a domain of discourse that is known to be fictional could do much to regulate human behavior for purely practical purposes? To Olson I would pose the question: even if it is psychologically possible to compartmentalize moral error theory from everyday practice, is it rational to do so?\(^2\) The realist should find it interesting that such a strong preservationist thread runs through both moral non-cognitivism and moral error theory – the two most extreme forms of anti-realism that are opposed even to Sayre-McCord’s minimal realism. Perhaps the realist can persuade some of these anti-realists by showing that these preservationist proposals fail, and that only realism does justice to these preservationist intuitions.

1.2 Mind-independence

Most philosophers think that cognitivism and the rejection of error theory about some domain of discourse are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for realism about it. So Sayre-McCord’s minimal realism is not enough. For example, Panayot Butchvarov writes that

\(^2\) Olson might say that it would be practically rational but epistemically irrational. Here I mean rational \textit{simpliciter}, or rational full stop. I argue in the second part of chapter 2, in which I deal with epistemic instrumentalism, that it is epistemic normativity is part of rationality \textit{simpliciter}. I defend the notion of rational \textit{simpliciter} in chapter 5.
Very roughly, I shall mean by unqualified realism with respect to \( x \) the view that (1) \( x \) exists and has certain properties, a nature, and (2) that its existence and nature are independent of our awareness of it, (3) of the manner in which we think of (conceptualize) it, and (4) of the manner in which we speak of it. (1989, 3)

On Butchvarov’s account, a domain of discourse is not construed realistically if some statements within it are deemed true, but their truth depends on human mental states or linguistic practices in any of these ways. David Brink concurs that metaphysical realism “typically claims that there are facts of a certain kind that are in some way mind-independent or independent of human thought” (1989, 14). Most moral realists seem to agree that full-blown realism requires this. Michael Huemer succinctly breaks down the difference between realists with one question: “Is goodness objective? Moral realists say yes; moral anti-realists say no” (2005, 4). The objectivity of goodness means that moral statements do not “constitutively [depend] at least in part on the psychological attitude or response that observers have or would have” toward them (2005, 2). Russ Shafer-Landau concurs:

[moral] realists believe that there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true in virtue of their
ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective. (2003, 13)

David Enoch also agrees:

...in addition to the requirements for minimal realism, Robust Realism is an objectivist, response-independent view of normativity. Unfortunately, these characteristics are themselves hard to characterize. The intuitive idea – for which I will settle for now – seems to be the conjunction of observer-independence and stance-independence. Whether or not a given normative statement applies (for instance) to a given action does not depend on what attitudes regarding it – cognitive or otherwise – are entertained by those judging that it is (or is not) or by anyone in their environment, nor does it depend on the attitudes, desires, and the like of the agent whose action it is or of anyone in her environment. (2011, 3. Internal references omitted.)

Adding the mind-independence criterion to moral realism seriously complicates the task of providing a general account of metaphysical realism. Brink writes:

But what kind of independence is involved in this claim? It cannot be causal independence, for surely realists about such things as artifacts will admit
that the existence of things like tables and chairs is causally dependent on their creator’s mental states, such as beliefs and desires. The realist must be asserting a different kind of independence, such as conceptual or metaphysical independence. The facts about the world are not constituted by the mental. But even if we construe ‘dependence’ as conceptual or metaphysical (rather than causal) dependence or constitution, this would seem to exclude too much. We want (I assume) to be able to formulate a realist theory of psychology, but surely psychological facts must be mind-dependent. We also want (I assume) to be able to construe hedonistic utilitarianism as a moral theory that might be objectively (realistically) true, but that moral theory makes moral facts consist in the existence or possession of certain qualitative mental states such as pleasure and pain. (1989, 15)

Sayre-McCord also recognizes this problem, which is what motivates his minimalist account of moral realism:

Yet in the account I offer, there is no mention of objectivity or existence, no mention of recognition transcendence or independence, no mention of reference, bivalence or correspondence. And this is a virtue. Independence from the mental might be a plausible requirement for realism when we’re talking about macrophysical objects but not when it comes to realism in
psychology (psychological facts won’t be independent of the mental); bivalence might go hand in hand with realism in mathematics, but realism in other areas seems perfectly compatible with acknowledging that some of our predicates are vague and have indeterminate extensions; and existence might be crucial to realism about scientific entities (since claims concerning such entities are true only if the entities exist), but not about scientific laws (that make no existence claims). (1988, 5-6. Emphasis mine.)

Sayre-McCord recommends adopting a minimalist account of realism, trumpeting its inclusiveness. But excessive inclusivity isn’t a virtue. According to Sayre-McCord’s definition of realism, the kind of conventionalism according to which moral facts are constructed in a way analogous to the way facts about money are constructed counts as a realist view of ethics. Surely, that’s too permissive. The proposal makes realism so broad that it isn’t very interesting. There might be some value in having a demarcation line between non-cognitivism and error theory, the two most extreme forms of anti-realism, and other views that are at least minimally realist, but seem to fall short of what most philosophers mean by realism (e.g., cultural relativism). But what are we to make of the problems associated with generalizing the condition of mind-independence? I suggest that we take “realism” to be context-dependent as follows:

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3 In a footnote he adds that epistemic independence is also implausible as a general constraint on realism, especially moral realism, since we cannot have moral duties that we are incapable of knowing about.
Generic realism for domain X. To be a metaphysical realist about some domain of discourse is to (a) assume minimal realism about it (i.e., to think that some of the statements within it are true) and (b) to take the most robustly realist stance towards the domain, relative to prominent competing views of the domain.4

2. Moral and Epistemic Realism
What are the degrees of realism with regard to ethics, then? And how ‘realist’ must a view of moral facts be in order to for that view to count as being a version of moral realism? We have already seen some proposed answers to these questions. Graham Oddie, whose categorization of views on the realist-anti-realist spectrum is more fine-grained than most, has proposed that there are five degrees of realism for value, each of which corresponds to a ‘yes’ answer to one of the following questions: Are value claims truth evaluable? Do value claims have truth makers? Are value facts mind-independent? Are value facts irreducible? Are value facts causally networked? (2013) Oddie, an audacious value realist, answers yes to each of these claims (2006, chapter 1), however unlike Huemer, he distinguishes value realism from moral realism, which for him requires truth about specifically deontic claims.

4 Note that intermediate forms of realism – by which I mean quasi-realist or anti-realist, but non-nihilist positions – are much more plausible in some domains than in others. Expressivism has more plausibility as a theory of moral or aesthetic properties than as a form of theistic anti-realism. The debates about God’s existence, or about the existence of mind-independent physical objects, don’t seem to admit of an expressivist option.
For my purposes here, I will take the content of moral assertions to be very broad, understanding them to encompass statements about goodness, assertions about duties and prima facie duties, and assertions about moral reasons. I do not fully endorse Oddie’s categorization schema primarily because I want to remain neutral on whether or not something’s being causally networked makes it more real, or more fundamental.

Terence Cuneo defines moral realism in somewhat different terms. He writes:

A realist conception of moral and epistemic features is something that, all else equal, ordinary mature human agents whose cognitive capacities are functioning adequately in a world such as ours take for granted in their everyday doings and believings. It is because this way of viewing things is rather entrenched in our shared world picture that it is difficult to formulate arguments for moral or epistemic realism that appeal to premises more obvious than themselves. (2007, 11).

On Cuneo’s (2007) picture, moral realism “of a paradigmatic kind” comprises three theses: the “Speech-Act Thesis,” the claim that moral statements have propositional content; the “Alethic Thesis” that some of them are true – so these two together are equivalent to Sayre-McCord’s minimal realism; and what he calls the

5 In his more recent book, Speech and Morality: On the Metaethical Implications of Speaking (2014, 8-13), Cuneo defends a more ecumenical kind of realism that is compatible with either non-naturalistic – what Enoch calls “robust” – moral realism or with naturalistic forms of realism like those just mentioned.
“Ontic Thesis,” that there are irreducible moral facts. Many philosophers who consider themselves moral realists, and who agree that there has to be some sort of mind-independence constraint on realism, are quite happy to embrace reductionism about moral facts, the idea that moral facts are natural facts of a particular kind (e.g., Railton (1986), Sturgeon (1985), Brink (1989), Sayre-McCord (1989)). For Cuneo in The Normative Web, moral realism requires irreducible moral facts. But what must be the case about moral facts in order for them to count as irreducible? Cuneo’s answer is faithfulness to what he calls the “central platitudes concerning moral facts.” These are of two kinds. First are platitudes about the content of the moral facts – e.g., that morality concerns human well-being and grounds duties not to harm others. A normative system that gives no weight at all to well-being, or gives weight only to our own well-being couldn’t constitute an ethical system (32-36). Then there are platitudes about the authority of morality. Moral reasons are genuinely normatively authoritative. Hence a theory that maintained that moral facts exist, but carried no normative weight, would not, for Cuneo, be compatible with moral realism (36-39).

Having surveyed these various accounts of moral realism, I am now prepared to say what I mean by “moral realism.” I will mean the following:

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6 One challenge that realists of this kind must face is to find something persuasive to say in response to G.E. Moore’s famous “Open-Question Argument.” According to this argument goodness cannot be identical to any natural fact – indeed, to anything other than itself – because it’s always meaningful to ask whether the proposed reduction base – say, pleasure – is good (2004, 8-11). Another is to identify what the reduction base for moral facts, or value facts, might be. But now is not the place to delve into the question of how successful naturalist moral realists have been in responding to these criticisms.
Moral Realism. Some moral statements are literally true in virtue of moral facts and these facts do not depend upon the subjective attitudes of real or idealized human agents, nor are they the product of any kind of social construction.\(^7\)

A few clarifying points are in order. What facts count as moral facts? I agree with Cuneo that the answer to this must be restricted by common sense, but I am not sure that there are any axioms about the content of morality that could never be revised if we found that a normative system existed that had all of the required features but one (I will discuss this more in chapter 3). For instance, if it turned out that there we had no binding obligations that related to the well-being of others, but that we have binding reasons to abstain from lying and unfairness, and to pursue excellence, then plausibly whatever normative domain includes these imperatives would simply be morality. There are of course limits to how much we can sensibly revise our moral concepts. A normative system that recommended only behavior that most ordinary people would find spectacularly immoral couldn’t constitute a moral system. Unlike Oddie, I will be construing “moral facts” very broadly, so that moral facts include: (1) facts about what things are valuable, (2) facts about what we have moral reason to do, (3) facts about what human actions are properly

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\(^7\) I also think moral realism presupposes a correspondence theory of truth. I mention this because Jeremy Koons attempts to defend a view according to which moral facts come out to be true, but only thanks to pluralism about truth. Moral statements aren’t true in virtue of corresponding to an objective realm, for Koons. I see this as lowering the bar for moral truth in the same way that Blackburn does with his truth minimalism maneuver.
describable as good or evil and (4) facts about what moral duties we have. A good
go-to example of a moral fact, which I will frequently make use of here, is: “The
Trans-Atlantic slave trade was morally evil.”

Following Cuneo, normative authority is a mark of the moral. Moral
imperatives, in order to be genuinely moral, need not be categorically normative in
all circumstances. But they must have enough normative force to frequently make it
the case that we do have most reason to do the morally correct thing – even when
that is not what is easiest for us to do or what we most desire to do. A normative
system that never imposed constraints on our interests or desires wouldn’t count as
a moral system, regardless of the degree to which its recommendations overlaps
with those of commonsense morality. Note what I am not requiring for moral
realism. I don’t require that moral facts be irreducible or take a position on whether
or not moral facts are causally efficacious.

With that in mind, by “epistemic realism” I shall mean the following:

**Epistemic Realism.** Some epistemic statements are literally true in virtue of
epistemic facts and these facts do not depend upon the subjective attitudes of
real or idealized human agents. Nor are these facts the product of any kind of
social construction.

I will understand “epistemic facts” to be a broad category in the same way
that I understand “moral facts” to be a broad category. Epistemic facts include facts
about what we should and shouldn’t believe (e.g., “You shouldn’t believe what is written on the Flat Earth Research Society webpage”; “You should believe that Tide pods are not nutritious for human beings”), and also facts about the epistemic statuses of cognitive states (e.g., what beliefs are justified, constitute knowledge or understanding, etc.). The mere fact that a particular belief is true does not count as an epistemic fact, in the sense intended. Otherwise, it would be too easy to show that epistemic realism is true – we’d have to admit that it was true on pain of saying that there are no true beliefs! The epistemic facts that I am interested in examining here seem to have a normative dimension. (I think that they do in fact have a normative dimension, though I can’t assert that at this point without begging the question).

3. An Overview of What is to Follow

Anyone who wishes to advance an argument for moral realism has to be able to explain why the argument is an improvement on the commonsense case for moral realism. It seems obvious – doesn’t it? – that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was morally evil, and that it would be wrong no matter what people came to think about slavery. Why not be satisfied with that argument? The answer is that the Epistemic Argument for Moral Realism aims a bit higher. It attempts to convince the anti-realist by engaging beliefs that she presumably already has, and showing that these commit her to moral realism. Presumably, my interlocutor believes that there are reasons to accept whatever form of moral anti-realism she thinks is most plausible,
and so she must accept that there are some epistemic reasons in order to maintain her own position. So epistemic nihilism or error theory isn’t an option. Neither is epistemic expressivism, for reasons that Cuneo explains (2007, 124-144). So the posit of epistemic reasons seems unavoidable, and certain kinds of anti-realism about epistemic facts seem harder to defend than their moral counterparts. This provides a dialectical foothold for the moral realist who thinks that epistemic and moral facts are interrelated. What follows is a brief summary of the structure of my argument.

Chapter 2: Against Epistemic Anti-Realism

This chapter is intended to support the first premise of the Epistemic Argument for Moral Realism by arguing against the views that I take to be its primary competitors: epistemic error theory and epistemic instrumentalism. We should reject epistemic error theory because it is self-defeating, since the normative error theorist is committed to saying that he has no epistemic reason to accept his own position. Further reasoning is supposed to show that epistemic error theory is not only unreasonable, but also false. Instrumentalism appears to me to be the most serious rival to epistemic realism. However I argue that we should reject it as well. If the epistemic domain were only instrumentally valuable, then epistemic reasons would be only hypothetical reasons—what Sarah Stroud refers to as “D-reasons,”—rather than being genuine normative reasons. However, intuitively this does not
seem to be the case. Epistemic reasons have genuine normative authority. Our best theory of epistemic normativity should account for that authority.

Chapter 3: Epistemic Value and Moral Realism

In this chapter, I attempt to establish the second premise of the Epistemic Argument for Moral Realism. This is what Cuneo refers to as the “Parity Premise.” Here I consider what grounds the normativity of epistemic reasons. I note that there are only three plausible options: that they are grounded in moral normativity; that they are grounded in practical normativity; and that they are grounded within the epistemic domain – i.e., they don’t need to be accredited by anything outside of the epistemic domain. If epistemic facts simply are moral facts of a certain kind, then it’s clear that realism about epistemic normativity entails realism about moral normativity. I will have already dealt with epistemic instrumentalism in chapter 2. That leaves only the view that epistemic normativity is grounded within the epistemic perspective, which Christopher Cowie refers to as epistemic “intrinsicalism.”

Here I focus on one kind of one version of intrinsicalism, the Epistemic Value Thesis (EVT). According to EVT, epistemic normativity is grounded in an epistemic form of value. I argue that if EVT is true, then epistemic value also grounds some practical reasons – some of which it makes sense to classify as moral. This is what I refer to as the “Shared Grounds Argument” for the Parity Premise.
Chapter 4: Two Entanglement Arguments for the Parity Premise

This chapter provides further arguments in favor of the Parity Premise. Previous attempts to show establish the Parity Premise rely on the claim that arguments for moral realism overgeneralize to impugn epistemic facts. I want to show that at least some epistemic facts entail moral facts. I provide two arguments in favor of this claim. I first argue that an agent's diligence or negligence as an investigator is sometimes relevant to the epistemic status of his beliefs. Because investigative diligence is sensitive to ethical considerations, realism about epistemic assessments in these cases implies realism about the presupposed ethical considerations. Second, epistemic assessments depend upon evidence an agent has available at a time. I argue that the notion of evidence possession is also – somewhat surprisingly – entangled with ethical considerations. If we deny this, then we end up with an unacceptably narrow conception of evidence possession.

Chapter 5: Against Normative Pluralism

Normative pluralism is the view that practical reason consists in an irreducible plurality of normative domains, that these domains sometimes issue conflicting recommendations and that, when this happens, there is never any one thing that one ought simpliciter to do. Normative pluralism comes up several times throughout the preceding chapters, particularly in chapter 3. In the final chapter, I argue against it. Normative pluralism must be either unrestricted or restricted. Unrestricted pluralism maintains that all coherent standards are reason-generating normative domains, whereas restricted pluralism maintains that only some are. I
demonstrate that neither of these views is defensible. The restricted pluralist has no principled grounds by which to include some domains but not others. The unrestricted pluralist, on the other hand, is committed to numerous absurdities, which I draw out.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Michael Huemer, Alastair Norcross, Chris Heathwood, Terence Cuneo and of course my advisor, Graham Oddie. Each one of them has in various ways shaped my thoughts about this topic. Huemer’s comments on an earlier draft of Chapter 4 (Forthcoming as “From Epistemic to Moral Realism” in the Journal of Moral Philosophy) were especially helpful, and I keep coming back to his work to inform my own. Heathwood was my master’s thesis advisor in 2012 and it was from that thesis that my first full paper publication, “Normative Pluralism Worthy of the Name is False” (Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy 11 (1) (2016)) eventually emerged. Norcross offered valuable feedback on these and other papers, both in writing and in informal conversations. Oddie’s comments on chapter 2 were especially helpful. His careful proofreading saved me from many embarrassing errors (yes, there were even more). Cuneo’s 2007 book, The Normative Web, which I reference frequently here, inspired this project. I was delighted to speak with him about my ideas at the 2016 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting in San Francisco. I’m even more delighted to have him on the committee now as the outside member. I hope to get more publications out of this dissertation. If I succeed, doubtless all members of this
committee will have had a hand in my success. Other philosophers not on my committee who have given me valuable feedback and support include Matthias Steup, Michael Tooley, Jim Skidmore, Bill McCurdy, Tyler Paytas, Bob Pasnau, and Steve Kershnar. I would also like to thank my supportive parents, Clayton and Terri Case, who (astoundingly) never doubted the wisdom of my career choice (yet). My apologies for those of you I have left out. All mistakes are my own (in this dissertation, I mean).
Chapter 2: Against Epistemic Anti-Realism

Here I will indirectly argue for the truth of epistemic realism, the first premise of the Epistemic Argument, by arguing against normative error theory and epistemic instrumentalism. I take these to views to be the most plausible alternatives to epistemic realism. Refuting these views will not prove that epistemic realism is true, but it should increase our credence in the claim that epistemic realism is true.

I begin with normative error theory, the view that normative judgments attribute properties that are never instantiated (I will flesh this out in greater detail momentarily). It’s possible in principle to be an epistemic error theorist without being an error theorist about normativity generally; however, I think that a moral anti-realist who is an error theorist about epistemic reasons is likely to be a general normative error theorist. So normative error theory is my first target. In any event, I argue that we should reject normative error theory because epistemic error theory is false.

My argument is as follows. Epistemic reasons appear to be normative reasons. If epistemic reasons are normative reasons then the normative error theorist is committed to holding that he has no epistemic reason to accept his own position, which seems absurd. Two strategies for resisting this argument are available, which I label the “disambiguation strategy” and the “bullet-biting strategy.” The first is to distinguish between normative and epistemic reasons, so

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8 Terence Cuneo argues in *The Normative Web* (2007) that the best known arguments against the existence of moral facts also impugn epistemic facts. If he is right and error theory is the most plausible version of anti-realism in both epistemology and ethics, then these moral nihilists are committed to full-bore normative nihilism.
that the error theorist can consistently say that she has epistemic reasons to believe her view. The second is to embrace the implication that there are no epistemic reasons to accept error theory and to deny that this is a problem for error theory. Philosophers have recently advanced sophisticated versions of both strategies. Stan Husi (2013) and Jonas Olson (2014) defend the disambiguation strategy; Bart Streumer (2013, 2017) defends the bullet-biting strategy, and Christopher Cowie (2016) employs both kinds of response.

Here I develop what I take to be the strongest version of the self-defeat argument against normative error theory and argue that neither strategy can be successfully deployed against it. The disambiguation strategy produces a dilemma whenever we try to specify what epistemic reasons are: they can be understood in way that renders them consistent with error theory, or in a way that is helpful for avoiding paradoxicality, but not both. As for the bullet-biting response, I argue that we should not only want our views to be true; we should also want them to be reasonable. The bullet-biting error theorist might respond that this begs the question against error theory; however, this objection can only be forceful if the charge of “question begging” presupposes some standard of reasonableness that is being violated. Needless to say, any such standard is inconsistent with normative error theory. So recent efforts to defuse the self-defeat argument fail, and it remains potent against normative error theory.
1. What Normative Error Theory Is
Following Streumer, I take total normative error theory to be the view that “normative judgments are beliefs that ascribe normative properties, even though such properties do not exist” (2013, 194). The error theorist disagrees with both the non-cognitivist, who denies that normative judgments are beliefs that attribute properties, and with the realist, who thinks that the properties attributed by normative judgments do exist and that they do not depend on subjective human attitudes, no matter how idealized. Error theory is also inconsistent with any metaethical view according to which there are normative properties that are grounded in subjective mental states or social conventions. At issue is not what grounds normative properties or facts, or how they are constituted, but whether there are such properties or facts at all.

Several philosophers have recently defended moral error theory, the view that moral judgments posit moral properties or facts that do not exist, on the grounds that moral reasons must be strongly categorical. This means at least that they apply to us whether we want them to or not, and that they are not easily...

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9 Another version of normative error theory maintains that all normative judgments are neither true nor false (Olson 2014, 9).
10 Examples include Charles L. Stevenson’s Expressivism (1967), and Simon Blackburn’s Quasi-Realism (1998).
11 Realists can be either naturalists, meaning that they believe that normative properties reduce to naturalistic properties, or non-naturalists, meaning that naturalistic properties are not so reducible. Examples of naturalistic realists include David Brink (1989), Nicholas Sturgeon (1988), and Richard Boyd (1988). Examples of non-naturalist realists include Shafer-Landau (2003), Michael Huemer (2005), and David Enoch (2011). Graham Oddie (2005) is also a realist in this sense, and, unlike many other non-naturalists, gives an extended argument for the irreducibility of the evaluative to the purely natural.
overridden by non-moral reasons.\textsuperscript{12} Many find this feature of moral facts suspicious. J.L. Mackie famously argues for the \textit{subjectivity} – not the non-existence – of values on the grounds that “objective prescriptivity” is unacceptably “queer” (1977, 15-25, 38-42).\textsuperscript{13} Richard Joyce, following Mackie, objects to the inescapability of moral demands on the grounds that we can make sense of someone who simply refuses to adopt the moral perspective (2001, 30-52). Jonas Olson (2014, 117), Christopher Cowie (2016, 115-6), and Stan Husi (2014, 424) also identify categoricity, or objective authority, as the problematic feature of moral facts.

To say that there is no categorical normativity or objective authority is not to commit to anything as strong as \textit{normative} error theory. We can think that there are no normative reasons that apply to us whether we want them to or not and still think that there are normative reasons of some kind. Suppose that I want to go to the movies tonight and that I have to take the 7:00 p.m. bus in order to get there on time. In this case, I have a hypothetical reason to take the 7:00 p.m. bus. Were I to change my mind about going to the movies, then I would have no reason to take the 7:00 p.m. bus. However contingent or hypothetical this reason may be, it is

\textsuperscript{12} Joyce identifies two criteria for morality’s inescapability, which I think amounts to what others refer to by its categoricity. First is its “weak normativity,” the fact that it applies to us whether or not we want it to. He cites Foot’s famous example of etiquette: the rules of etiquette apply to us regardless of whether or not we want them to (Joyce 2001, 35-36; Foot 1972, 305-16). Morality, however, is categorical in a stronger sense than this. In addition to being weakly categorical, morality is binding. Joyce does not specify what, precisely, that means. But I think he does not need anything so strong as the idea that morality is absolutely overriding in all circumstances. So I have opted for a modest definition for strong categoricity: moral reasons apply to us whether or not we want them to, and they cannot easily be overridden.

\textsuperscript{13} His other reason for rejecting moral facts is widespread disagreement about them (1977, 36-8). Arguably, this is less true about facts about what is “good for” one. So subjective reasons appear to fare better by Mackie’s standards.
nonetheless a normative reason, and is thus incompatible with normative error theory. Few philosophers defend full-blown normative error theory, as opposed to moral error theory. Streumer (2013, 2017) is an exception (or perhaps a quasi-exception, since his view entails that no one, including himself, can believe normative error theory).

Henceforth I will refer to normative error theory simply as error theory, unless it is necessary to distinguish it from moral error theory.

2. The Self-Defeat Argument

G.E. Moore famously noticed that statements like “It’s raining, but I don’t believe that it’s raining” and “It’s not raining, but I believe that it is” seem incoherent, although they are not straightforwardly contradictory. The same appears to be true of unspoken thoughts with these contents. Philosophers have called this oddity “Moore’s paradox” and have labored to explain it. Here I will neither discuss these attempts, nor provide my own, but will proceed on the assumption that something is amiss with uttering sentences like these. Now consider:

_Self-Defeat._ Error theory is true, but I have no reason to believe that.

As with Moore-paradoxical statements, something seems to be awry here.

The person who asserts _Self-Defeat_ appears to give with one hand and take with the

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other. Many philosophers think that something must be wrong with error theory because it commits those who accept it to propositions like *Self-Defeat*. David Copp writes that “Paradoxically, if one thinks that an argument proves normative skepticism to be true, he cannot consistently hold that the argument justifies belief in normative skepticism” (1995, 46–7). Husi writes that “Skepticism [about normative reasons] appears to be cutting off the very justificatory branch it sits upon, seeking to engage [in] a dialectical enterprise while denying its currency” (2013, 429). Joyce writes that “to question practical rationality is unintelligible—it is to ask for a reason while implying that no reason will be adequate” (Joyce 2001, 49–50). Terence Cuneo writes that

> If... epistemic nihilists [i.e., epistemic error theorists] hold that we do not have epistemic reasons to believe their position then their position is polemically toothless in the following sense: No one would make a rational mistake in rejecting it and no one would be epistemically praiseworthy for accepting it. (2007, 117)

Finally, Streumer writes that

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15 What I find troubling about the second horn is that the nihilist can’t take *himself* to have any reasons for his own view. According to Cuneo, this dilemma is one of three undesirable consequences of epistemic nihilism that are sufficient for rejecting the view. The second is that if epistemic nihilism is not self-defeating (again meaning logically inconsistent), then there are no reasons to believe *anything whatsoever*. The third is that if nihilism is logically consistent, then there could be no arguments for anything. See *The Normative Web* (2007), Chapter 4.
The property of being a reason for belief, in the sense of a consideration that counts in favor of a belief, is a normative property. If the error theory is true, this property does not exist. The error theory therefore entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory. (2013, 197)

Husi and Streumer defend error theory from this objection, but both recognize that it is a problem that must be taken seriously. I believe the argument against error theory is most forcefully stated as follows:

**Self-Defeat Argument**

(1) Error theory commits us to *Self-Defeat*.

(2) If a position commits us to *Self-Defeat*, or any similarly paradoxical statement, then we should reject that position.

C1: We should reject error theory.\(^\text{17}\)

(3) If we should reject error theory, then error theory is false.

C2: Therefore error theory is false.

I want to be clear about why the argument does not end with C1. Saying that we should reject a position is not the same as saying that it is false, since it is

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\(^{16}\) Husi describes his view as “Radical meta-normative reasons skepticism,” which he defines as the view that “the view that no standard, norm, or principle has objective authority or normative force” (2014, 434). The context of the paper makes it clear that this amounts to moral error theory, though like Olson, Cowie and others he leaves the door open for there to be desire-based reasons.

\(^{17}\) To say that a position should be rejected is not the same as to say it is false; this is an issue we will return to in due time.
compatible with our having practical, rather than epistemic, reasons to reject it. Note, however, that both possibilities are incompatible with normative error theory. An atheist could accommodate the charge that we have practical reasons to believe that there is a God. A utilitarian, confronted with a persuasive argument that we have utility-based reasons not to believe in utilitarianism, could continue to believe that utilitarianism is true and take herself to have epistemic reasons to believe this. The error theorist could not consistently say anything similar about error theory. On the other hand, if we have any normative reasons at all, including practical reasons, not to believe error theory, then error theory is false.

3. The First Strategy: Deny That Epistemic Reasons Are Normative

In order to reject the first premise of the argument, the error theorist must distinguish between normative and epistemic reasons. The statement that “There are no A-reasons, and I have good B-reasons for thinking that” has no air of paradox. The challenge for the error theorist who wants to pursue this defense is to explain what exactly epistemic reasons are if they are not normative reasons. In this section, I will consider three answers that defenders of error theory have given to this question: reducible reasons, D-reasons (i.e., domain-relative reasons), and non-categorical reasons. As we shall see, each of these attempts to thread the needle either makes epistemic reasons incompatible with error theory, or else deflates epistemic reasons in such a way that the paradox reoccurs.

We begin with Jonas Olson’s account – to be clear, he puts this forward as a defense of moral error theory not normative error theory, but it is one of the most
promising routes for distinguishing normative and epistemic reasons. Following Mackie (1977, 38-42), Olson claims that moral facts are unacceptably “queer” because they entail an “irreducibly normative favoring relation” (2014, 118). However, “there need be nothing metaphysically queer about there being a reason for writers in English not to split the infinitive since, in one sense of ‘reason’, this is just for there to be a rule of grammar according to which splitting the infinitive is inappropriate” (2014, 121). The same goes for other convention-based reasons: “[T]he point here is that moral error theorists need not deny that there are standards of correctness in logic and reasoning because these reasons are reducible” (2014, 138. Emphasis mine).

The problem with this proposal, as a defense of normative error theory, is that reduction does not imply elimination: to say that A’s are reducible to B’s is to affirm the existence of A’s as B’s. An eliminative materialist about the mind, who maintains that there is no mind or folk psychological states such as beliefs or attitudes (e.g., P.S. and P.M. Churchland (1998)), must reject the view that folk psychological states are reducible to brain states. This after all leaves the folk psychological states in the picture when eliminativism says that they do not exist. The error theorist must reject the view that normativity is reducible for the same reason. So this way of distinguishing between epistemic reasons and normative reasons fails to be consistent with error theory.

Olson appears at times to be using the word “reducible” non-standardly, however, suggesting that he has in mind a different distinction between moral and
epistemic reasons. Olson cites John Broome, who notes that any source of rules is normative in the weak sense of relating to rules: “Catholicism requires you to abstain from eating meat on Fridays. This is a rule and it is incorrect to eat meat on Fridays. So Catholicism is normative in this sense” (Broome 2007, 162). For a non-Catholic, the norm of meat avoidance on Friday can be said to be normative, though it is not authoritative. For Olson, and I think for most philosophers, “normative” implies “authoritative” so that, as Olson says, “To say that some behavior is correct or incorrect relative to some norm, N, is not to say anything normative. It is merely to say something about what kind of behaviour is required, recommended or forbidden by N” (2014, 120). These passages suggest that Olson really wants to draw the line between authoritative reasons, which the error theorist must reject, and what Sarah Stroud calls D-reasons, which an error theorist can accept. A D-reason is “a consideration which has weight within or internal to the D-system of evaluation” that may or may not be authoritative (1998, 172-173).

Husi seems to have the same idea in mind when he writes that “Rejecting a norm’s authority, in short, does not amount to rejecting the norm itself!” (2014, 431). He adds that “there is nothing paradoxical or incoherent in the notion that skeptics may use the basic norms in order to advance their position while simultaneously denying their authority and affirming their constitutive nature” (2014, 435). I think an illustration might help clarify what Husi means. An anarchist can reject the authority of the law that forbids jaywalking while acknowledging that jaywalking is wrong relative to the legal norms, or even while
making a legal argument in a court. Likewise the error theorist can consistently say
that arguments in favor of error theory are evaluated positively by the epistemic
standards while denying that these standards are authoritative. This proposal
appears to be compatible with error theory in a way that the reductionism proposal
is not. Unfortunately it does not resolve the paradox.

Stroud, by way of example, describes D-reasons that are internal to the
“social climbing point of view,” which have neither intrinsic nor, for Stroud,
instrumental value, hence: “A consideration relevant within the social-climbing
scheme of evaluation may simply have no force in my practical reasoning” (1998,
172-173). Social climbing is often very useful. The same can be said about the norms
of grammar, legality, etiquette, and the rules that govern games – Olson’s and
Husi’s go-to examples of non-authoritative domains. We generally have defeasible
reasons to obey the law, be polite, and abide by the rules of whatever game we are
playing. It is common sense that these norms do not issue overriding reasons for
action; if error theory is true, however, then these norms lack authority in the more
radical sense that they never provide reasons for action that are practically
significant to any degree.

Consider some standards that we would agree lack normative authority in
this stronger sense: promoting the interests of your least favorite politician as an
end unto itself, doing the opposite of whatever both prudence and morality require
(when they do converge), or maximizing the number of plastic forks in the world.
Call reasons internal to one of these domains, or some other conceivable domain
that seems to you to be the least likely to generate genuine normative reasons, “Y-reasons.” Now suppose that you discovered that some action that you intend to perform, or some well-considered belief that you harbor, were supported only by Y-reasons. Would your level of confidence in that course of action, or belief, remain the same? I expect not. If it seems paradoxical to say “X is my view, and I have no reason to believe X,” then it should seem no less paradoxical to say “X is my view, and I have only Y-reasons to believe X.” Husi seems to be grappling with a similar thought when he writes:

> Without any confidence in the authority of the relevant [epistemic] norms, the realist may complain, the skeptic’s intention to stay committed to them anyway must emerge as an unsustainable fetish, a sort of rule-worship in its worst form” (2014, 443).

His response is to distinguish between a fetish and a commitment. The difference between the two is that commitments “are stable psychological dispositions endorsed by reflection to follow some norm’s dictates” whereas fetishes are not so well-integrated into the agent’s psychology (2014, 443). But the problem was never to explain how belief in error theory is a psychological possibility. It was to explain how error theory can seem like a reasonable thing to believe from the first-person perspective. In this respect, commitments are not relevantly different than fetishes unless “endorsed by reflection” smuggles in normative content.
An error theorist wanting to defend the idea that epistemic reasons are non-authoritative D-reasons might also say the following:

Yes, your confidence would be undermined if you learned that your views were supported only by reasons internal to one of those domains, but that is because they are not truth-tracking. Because the epistemic domain is defined by its connection to truth, no similar devaluation occurs if we say ‘X is my view, and I have good epistemic reasons to believe that, though I think that the epistemic domain is not authoritative.’

This raises the question of whether we can make sense of there being an epistemic domain at all if it lacks normative authority. That a domain lacks authority must mean more than that it is psychologically possible to disregard its verdicts because that is true of anything. It must mean that it is possible to rationally disregard its verdicts. A person can recognize something as being illegal without thinking that this means she has any reason to avoid doing that thing. Likewise a person who understands the official rules that govern chess might decide he wants to play a non-standard variation of the game. It makes sense to talk about these domains as being non-authoritative, but it would be a hasty generalization to conclude that what must be true of chess and legal norms must be true of all normative domains. The epistemic domain is different because it is plausibly constitutive of rationality as such. If that is right, then contrary to Husi’s
suggestion, there is no logical space to accept the epistemic domain while denying its authority.

The error theorist might respond by denying that there is any rationality as such, or reason *simpliciter*. Instead, all rationality is internal to some domain or other, so that we have e-rationality and d-rationality, etc., but no generic rationality to which all these domains are subordinate. The problem with this reply is that the point of introducing the concept of a D-reason in this context was to generate a meaningful distinction between normative reasons, such as what moral and prudential reasons seem to be, and epistemic reasons. This move puts epistemic reasons on the same normative plane with these others. The person who admits of this kind of radical normative pluralism does seem committed to rejecting the notion of a categorical imperative, since that would be a requirement *simpliciter*, but is nonetheless apparently committed to the existence of normative reasons of some sort. And epistemic reasons apparently turn out to be reasons in the same sense that other normative reasons, such as moral reasons, are. So again, this response ends up not being consistent with error theory. If, on the other hand, the error theorist insists that there is no reason *simpliciter*, then D-reasons are not normative reasons in any sense; in that case, she would be stuck with Self-Defeat.

I turn now to the third and final attempt to distinguish between epistemic reasons and normative reasons. Cowie writes:

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18 See Derek Baker (forthcoming) for an articulation of this view. For a contrary view, see Spencer Case (2016). More discussion to follow in chapter 5.
Just as the moral error theorist will deny that torturing the innocent is wrong, precisely because she denies that there are any categorical reasons, so she [the error theorist] may deny that certain beliefs are justified, rational, or warranted (etc.) just because there are not categorical reasons for belief. This, she will maintain, is consistent with the existence of evidential support relations holding in relation to that belief. (2016, 119)

On this picture, the error theorist is committed not to *Self-Defeat*, but only to the innocuous proposition that “There are no categorical reasons, and I have good (non-categorical) reasons to believe that.” Cowie defines categorical reasons for action as “reasons for action that don’t just obtain in virtue of one’s contingently held desires or of mere social convention” (2016, 115-6). A footnote informs the reader that by “categorical reasons” Cowie means essentially what Russ Shafer-Landau means by “stance-independence.” Shafer-Landau writes that the stance-independence of morality means that “the moral standards that fix moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective” (2003, 15). It’s not clear to me whether this really is a distinct proposal from the one we’ve just considered, but I will consider it as a distinct proposal to be on the safe side.

As an attempt to save normative error theory, as opposed to moral error theory, from self-defeat, Cowie’s proposal faces two problems. First, epistemic
reasons, even if we accept a non-deontological conception of them, appear to be stance-independent. After all, the standard that epistemically justified beliefs are those that are proportioned to the evidence that the agent has at a time, which is the account of justification that evidentialists like Earl Conee and Richard Feldman provide (2011, 83-107), does not appear to depend on desire or convention. So the error theorist who takes this line appears committed to rejecting epistemic reasons as well as moral reasons, meaning that she remains committed to Self-Defeat.

Second, to reiterate, the denial that there are stance-independent normative facts or properties is insufficient for normative error theory. The view that there are normative reasons, all of which are desire-dependent, is inconsistent with both moral realism and error theory. So Cowie’s definition of error theory as the rejection of categorical reasons is too broad to serve that purpose. That is no fault of his since he means to defend moral error theory.

If what I have argued in this section is correct, then the error theorist cannot usefully distinguish between normative and epistemic reasons in any of the ways described. This does not rule out the possibility that there might be some other way of distinguishing epistemic reasons from normative reasons that avoids these pitfalls; I have, however, considered the most promising attempts that have been proposed (though all have been put forward as defenses of moral, rather than full-blown normative, error theory). If some other account fares better, then the burden is on the error theorist to explain what it is. Suppose, however, that the error

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theorist, instead of attempting to epistemically justify her own acceptance of error theory, says this:

Take whatever account of the epistemic standards you uphold. I predict that it will evaluate the reasons I have for believing in error theory as good reasons. For example, suppose that one of the epistemic rules is “avoid believing contradictions.” I can point out that my view is logically coherent and therefore belief in it is permitted by this rule. If error theory receives a clean bill of health according to your standards, then you have no basis for rejecting it.\(^20\) I can win the argument simply by showing that my opponent’s house cannot stand. And that I can do without committing myself to anything paradoxical.

The problem with this response is that there is no space for it to work. This reply rests on the notion that epistemic standards either constitute or entail normative standards or they provide us no reason, obligation, permission, etc. to believe anything. If the interlocutor were to have an account of normative reasons capable of constituting or justifying epistemic standards, then in virtue of this account he would reject error theory. This can be seen in the above argument. If the interlocutor were to have no such account, then the error theorist’s “let’s use your

\(^{20}\) The interlocutor could define the epistemic standards in such a way that they are by definition incompatible with nihilism – for example, epistemic standards could be defined as being whatever norms are rationally authoritative for governing belief formation – but if the nihilist is right, then these norms would be inconsistent.
standards” challenge could not get off the ground. By analogy, one cannot show moral relativism is true from on utilitarian grounds because the premise itself contradicts relativism.\textsuperscript{21}

I consider responding to all of the arguments given in favor of error theory to be beyond the scope of my project here. Others have done this elsewhere.\textsuperscript{22} My purpose is to develop and defend the Self-Defeat Argument against error theory. For this project, it suffices to point out that the error theorist must do more than show that her opponent’s house cannot stand. That will not rescue her own house. So the challenge that the Self-Defeat Argument poses to error theory remains outstanding.


The other available response to the Self-Defeat Argument, to which I now turn, is to deny that it is a problem for error theory if the error theorist is committed to Self-Defeat. Cowie and Streumer have both advanced versions of the defense. Here is Cowie:

In short she [the error theorist] will claim that we possess evidence for some of our beliefs, but not categorically normative reasons to hold those beliefs. This might seem a substantial bullet to bite…. But recall that moral error theorists have already bitten the bullet in accepting that that [sic] torturing the innocent for fun is not morally wrong. (2016, 120)

\textsuperscript{21} Thanks to Steve Kershnar for helping me formulate this.

Again, according to normative, as opposed to moral, error theory, we lack both categorical and non-categorical reasons for believing error theory. Nonetheless, Cowie’s point still applies. I take that to be that for the error theorist to concede that she has no epistemic reasons to believe her own view is no more counterintuitive than many other things to which she is committed (e.g., “the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was not morally wrong,” “I have no reason not to put my hand on a hot stove”). Either these repugnant conclusions constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* against error theory on their own, in which case the Self-Defeat Argument is superfluous, or else they do not, in which case it unclear why the Self-Defeat Argument should be a game changer. Having bitten nearly the entire arsenal already, the error theorist can afford to bite one more bullet.

An unstated assumption here, which I think should be rejected, is that error theory is immune to any *reductio ad absurdum* that commits the error theorist to anything less counterintuitive than what she is already willing to accept. Consider, for example, that some implications of error theory may be even more counterintuitive than the rejection of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC), the idea that there are no true propositions of the form “p and not p.” I can *imagine* being presented with an apparently sound argument that the only way for me to preserve my belief that there are reasons not to kill and eat my own children is to accept dialetheism, the view that there are some true contradictions.23 In that case, accepting dialetheism would seem to me to be the smaller bullet to bite. Surely,

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23 Graham Priest (2006a) notoriously defends this view.
though, that does not show that the error theorist would have nothing to fear from an argument demonstrating that error theory commits us to rejecting the PNC because this is less counter-intuitive than what she is willing to accept. The same, I think, is true of accepting self-defeating propositions.

I will say more about the severity of self-defeat as a problem for a philosophical position shortly. For now I turn my attention to Streumer’s ingenious, if maddening, defense of error theory. Unlike any of the other error theorists we have discussed, Streumer not only concedes that if error theory is true, then we have no reason to believe it, thereby committing himself to *Self-Defeat*, but goes on to claim that believing error theory is *impossible*. To be precise, he claims that it is impossible to have an occurrent, explicit and full – or “very confident” – belief in nihilism (2017, 131-2).²⁴ So Streumer, by his own lights, is also committed to the straightforwardly Moore-paradoxical statement “Error theory is true, but I do not believe that it is true.” Streumer, however, denies that either this commitment, or his commitment to *Self-Defeat*, are philosophically problematic:

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²⁴ His primary argument is that in order to believe that p, it is necessary to understand p, where this entails understanding its obvious implications. Streumer will deny that an average layperson can truly believe either the Theory of Relativity or Quantum Mechanics, since a layperson cannot understand these theories and many of their clear implications. One obvious implication of nihilism is that there are no reasons to believe it; hence, anyone who believes nihilism must believe that there is no reason to believe in nihilism. But the nihilist must believe that he has no reasons to believe in nihilism. It follows that that nihilism cannot be believed. Alexander Hyun and Eric Sampson, in their response to Streumer, formalize the argument as follows:

(1) Anyone who believes the error theory believes that the error theory entails that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
(2) We cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs.
(3) So, anyone who believes the error theory believes that there is no reason to believe the error theory.
(4) We cannot have a belief while believing that there is no reason for this belief. So, nobody can believe the error theory. (2014, 631)
Just as a theory can be true if we do not believe it, a theory can also be true if we cannot believe it. Of course, if we cannot believe a theory, we cannot sincerely say that this theory is true. But our inability to sincerely say that a theory is true does nothing to show that it is false. (2013, 201)

Streumer goes on to say: “Instead of showing that my arguments are unsound or that the error theory is false, this would merely show that I have insincerely put forward sound arguments and have insincerely told you the truth” (2013, 210-11). Whereas Husi (2013, 431) seeks a path to “faithful participation in the argumentative enterprise” while rejecting objective normative authority, Streumer seems unbothered about whether his own participation is faithful. Streumer quotes David Lewis, who advocated “a simple maxim of honesty: never put forward a philosophical theory that you yourself cannot believe in your least philosophical and most commonsensical moments” (1984, x); however, he rejects this principle writing: “There is no reason why the truth could not be beyond our grasp” (2013, 212). Streumer might also, if he is not too worried about what company he keeps, have quoted Thrasymachus, who tells Socrates: “What difference does it make to you whether I believe it or not? Isn’t it my account you’re supposed to be refuting?” (Republic 349a).25 I take Streumer to be characterizing the Moore-paradox objection as follows:

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25 Hallvard Lillehammer and Niklas Möller (2015) and Alexander Hyun and Eric Sampson (2014) have raised interesting objections to Streumer’s arguments that error theory cannot be believed (and
Streumer’s Moore-Paradox Argument

1. Nihilism is a theory that cannot be believed or sincerely asserted.

2. If a theory cannot be reasonably believed or sincerely asserted, then it is false.

Therefore, nihilism is false.

Streumer urges us to reject this argument because the second premise is unsupported. But recall that my Self-Defeat Argument does not rely on that premise. It relies instead on (2), “If a position commits us to Self-Defeat, or any similarly paradoxical statement, then we should reject that position” where “should” is generic and could stand in for any kind of normative reason, practical or epistemic. To motivate this premise, consider the grounds on which Graham Priest rejects considers trivialism, the view that all propositions are true, or that all contradictions are true:

The trivialist—at least while they remember that they are a trivialist—can have no purpose at all. One cannot act in such a way as to bring about some state of affairs, s, if one believes s already to hold. Conversely, if one acts to bring s about, one cannot believe that s already obtains. Hence, if one

_for his further, even more counter-intuitive claim that this feature of error theory actually makes it more likely to be true_. I will instead address Streumer’s claim that it is not a problem for error theory if we can neither have any reason to believe that view, nor sincerely defend it before others.
believes everything is true, one cannot act purposefully. (2006b, 69. Emphasis mine.)

He adds:

Choosing is an irredeemably goal-oriented activity. As we have seen, such action is incompatible with believing everything. It follows that I cannot but reject trivialism. Phenomenologically, it is not an option for me. This does not show trivialism is untrue. As far as the above considerations go, it is quite possible that everything is the case; but not for me—or for any other person. (2006b, 70.)

Frederick Kroon objects that this argument shows only that the trivialist should not believe her own view by her own lights, not that it is false. The position of the trivialist therefore does not appear to be any different from that of the act utilitarian who believes that her own belief in act utilitarianism is not utility-maximizing. This utilitarian concedes that she should not (morally) believe her own position, but insists that it is nonetheless true (2004, 64). Priest responds:

Whatever one makes of this question [of the utilitarian], the matter is beside the point here. The force of the argument from choice is precisely that the trivialist cannot believe her own position. The only way that she can
participate in the debate is, as it were, to disown it. This is a damning dialectical point. (2006b, 70)

It is not entirely clear from this reply why Priest takes the trivialist to face a “damning dialectical point,” but not the act utilitarian who also, in a way, must disown her own position. I think we can flesh out Priest’s argument against trivialism a bit further. What I take him to be saying—since he concedes that the reason he gives for rejecting trivialism does not show that trivialism is false—is that in addition to wanting our beliefs to be true, we should want to be reasonable ourselves. Being reasonable precludes adopting views that cannot be sincerely defended before others. The utilitarian’s belief that she morally or prudentially should not believe act utilitarianism does not imply that she does not in fact believe it, or that she believes that she has no reasons to believe it. Although the utilitarian might think that deception is licensed to prevent others from discovering the esoteric truth about morality, her position does not entail that she must be insincere when engaging with others. So the utilitarian’s predicament does not necessarily preclude her from being a reasonable investigator, thinker, and interlocutor. The same is not true of the trivialist, or I believe, of the normative error theorist who embraces paradoxicality like Streumer does.

That Streumer’s bullet-biting response cannot reasonably be defended before others, and that it is in that sense unreasonable, constitutes a normative reason of some kind not to accept it. And since at least this normative reason exists, error
theory must be false. An error theorist might reply by claiming that this argument begs the question against error theory. Whether that is true depends on what is meant by “begging the question.” If it means only that a bullet-biting error theorist can be expected to reject it, then that is true, but it is not clear that this represents a problem for the argument. The standard for a good argument, I submit, is whether it should persuade a neutral arbiter – that is, a _reasonable_ arbiter – not the most hard-bitten opponent possible. Streumer should concede as much. Recall the grounds on which Streumer dismisses the Moore-paradox objection: the fact a proposition cannot be believed does not entail that it is less likely to be true (2013, 201; 2017, 150-2). Similarly, there appears to be no logical relationship between the proposition that an argument is unlikely to persuade a hard bitten interlocutor and that its conclusion is false. So by that standard there appears to be nothing wrong with the argument.

We might also understand “question-begging” in a normative way, so that an argument that begs the question is necessarily a bad one. I think this is how philosophers generally use the term. Question-begging arguments need not be unsound; indeed, a question-begging argument has to be valid. It follows that all question-begging arguments with true conclusions are sound. In what way are they deficient, then? Apparently, it is that they are dialectically inapt, or inappropriate given the rhetorical context in which they occur – i.e., that they are _unreasonable_. If that is right, then Streumer does not have recourse to this objection. A neutral arbiter could worry that my argument is question-begging in this sense, but only if
she were already committed to the idea that there are such standards – i.e., if she were committed to the rejection of error theory on some other grounds. If some arguments are objectionably question-begging, then epistemic error theory, and normative error theory more generally, must be false.

5. Does the Self-Defeat Argument prove too much?

Some might challenge (2) on the grounds that it overgeneralizes to impugn eliminative materialism as well as error theory. After all, someone who thinks that there are no folk psychological states such as beliefs seems committed to saying “Eliminativism is true, but I do not believe that it is true,” which is Moore-paradoxical (Baker 1987, 134). I think that if we accept the Self-Defeat Argument against error theory, then a similar argument against folk-psychological eliminativism seems plausible, but that accepting the former does not commit us to accepting the latter. Whether it does or not depends on how radical a revision to our folk psychology eliminativism requires.

If the error theorist thinks that a completed neuroscience will turn up nothing at all that in any way resembles belief, or affirmation of some proposition, then there is no way to avoid Moore-paradoxicality. But an eliminativist might think that although there is no belief in the ordinary sense of the word, neuroscience will likely uncover something similar to it. So the eliminativist would in that case say something like “Eliminativism is true, and although I do not believe it is true, there is some sense that neuroscience will uncover in which I affirm that it is true.” Perhaps that blunts the force of the Moore-paradox objection to
eliminativism in a way that I claimed revisionist accounts of epistemic reasons do not. I take no position on whether or not this sort of reply succeeds.

Here is another, seemingly more threatening way that we might think that this argument overgeneralizes. An epistemic foundationalist believes that we have certain beliefs that are not epistemically justified by anything further. Suppose that A is one of those beliefs. The foundationalist is then committed to saying “A, but I have no epistemic reason to believe that A” (e.g., Reid 1997, 168-9; Sampson and Hyun 2014, 634). So the foundationalist appears to be committed to a proposition analogous to *Self-Defeat*. So does the Self-Defeat Argument show that we must reject foundationalism as well as error theory? That result would be especially unwelcome, since foundationalism is a much more widely held position than eliminativism.

There are two reasons why we might accept the Self-Defeat Argument against error theory without thinking that a similar argument undermines foundationalism. First, we might disambiguate (2) by clarifying that “a position that commits us to *Self-Defeat*” refers philosophical theories and not foundational beliefs. That may seem ad hoc, but if there are foundational beliefs, then it does make sense to treat them differently, in certain respects, from considered philosophical positions. A second strategy is to note that foundationalism concerns only epistemic reasons, not all normative reasons. A foundationalist can concede that we might still have practical reasons to believe foundational beliefs (e.g., “I believe that my senses are basically reliable not because I can give any argument to support that,
but because it would be bad for me to adopt a policy of doubting that”). So there is room to accept the Self-Defeat Argument against error theory and also accept foundationalism.

6. Epistemic Instrumentalism

I now turn my attention to epistemic instrumentalism. The term “instrumentalism” has been used to describe a variety of views. Sayre-McCord describes non-cognitivist moral views like expressivism – the view that moral statements are expressions of the speaker’s values rather than attempts to describe the world – as moral instrumentalism (1988, 7-8). Contemporary moral expressivists such as Simon Blackburn (1998) and Allan Gibbard (1990) develop sophisticated semantics in order to retain fidelity to ordinary speech norms, but without making any ontological claims. As Cuneo says “Expressivism is a difficult position with which to engage” (2007, 124). That is largely because the expressivist’s semantics allow him to say all (or nearly all) of the things that the realist would say without holding any of the latter’s ontological commitments; so it’s difficult to clearly state the differences between expressivism and realism in terms that both expressivists and realists will accept. By epistemic expressivism, I mean the view that epistemic statements are expressions of the speaker’s values, rather than attempts to describe the world. Epistemic expressivism is not defended very often, and I think for good reason: epistemic assessments do seem to be to be descriptions of cognitive states
and not mere expressions of approbation or disapprobation. Doubtless this will seem flat-footed to a thoroughgoing expressivist.\textsuperscript{26}

Here I will focus here on descriptivist versions of instrumentalism, according to which epistemic assessments really do attempt to describe the world, but that the normative significance of those assessments derives from the practical reasons that the agent has. Epistemic instrumentalism so described canvases a variety of views. It’s consistent with this view that epistemic reasons are instrumental to promoting an agent’s well-being and facts about this agent’s well-being are independent of any of her ends. However, once we concede that there are facts about well-being that are independent of an agent’s ends, positing the existence of \textit{moral} facts that are independent of an agent’s end as well is a small step further. So although this form of epistemic instrumentalism is consistent with moral anti-realism, adopting it would put the moral anti-realist in a weaker dialectical position.

The best version of instrumentalism for the committed moral anti-realist to adopt, dialectically speaking, is one according to which the normativity of an agent’s epistemic reasons derives from the reasons she has to achieve her ends – regardless of what ends those happen to be. We might also understand epistemic instrumentalism to be the view that epistemic reasons are instrumental to specifically epistemic goals, such as true belief, knowledge, etc., but not necessarily to an agent’s general ends. One problem with this view is that it’s unclear what makes the epistemic reasons authoritative (i.e., what makes them more than mere

\textsuperscript{26} For an extended engagement with epistemic expressivism, see chapters 6 and 7 of Cuneo’s \textit{The Normative Web} (2007).
D-reasons). It’s far from obvious that each and every agent has the relevant epistemic goals in every case. (Ask yourself: how likely is it that most people have a general desire to believe true things, or to avoid false beliefs, or to acquire knowledge?) If not, then although the agent may have epistemic “reasons” to believe the truth, these reasons will not be binding. Rather they will be internal to a domain that lacks normative authority, which means that they can be rationally disregarded whenever they aren’t instrumentally valuable. But epistemic rationality doesn’t seem to be like this.

6.1 Normative Instrumentalism

Epistemic instrumentalism is often adopted by philosophers who are committed to the more comprehensive view that all normativity derives from our ends. I will follow Charles Côté-Bouchard (2015) in referring to this view as “normative instrumentalism” (2015, 338). It has also been called “hypotheticalism,” (Schroeder 2007, 5), and a “Neo-Humean conception of rationality” (Quinn 1993, 210). Côté-Bouchard writes that “the main motivation” for adopting normative instrumentalism, “is that it promises to help make normativity and reasons unproblematic from a naturalistic point of view. Normativity is arguably less mysterious if it ultimately has to do with our ends” (2015, 339). Philosophers who endorse normative instrumentalism by one name or another include Richard Foley (1992), Philippa Foot (1972), and Mark Schroeder (2007).27 We have already seen

27 Foot would later disavow this view in her Natural Goodness (2001, chapter 1).
that instrumentalism is the preferred theory of rationality by moral error theorists such as Olson (2014), Joyce (2003) and Husi (2013).28

So descriptive normative instrumentalism enjoys support from a wide variety of philosophers.29 This view entails epistemic instrumentalism, which I consider to be the most serious rival to epistemic realism. If epistemic instrumentalism is plausible primarily because normative instrumentalism is plausible – that is, if it cannot easily be motivated independently of normative instrumentalism – then one indirect strategy for attacking epistemic instrumentalism is to undermine normative instrumentalism. Joseph Raz rejects normative instrumentalism in the most dramatic way possible: by rejecting the notion that there is any distinctively instrumental kind of practical reason at all (his reasoning extends to epistemic instrumentalism).

Raz argues that “the way goals acquire their normative relevance is by being conditions on the applicability or stringency of reasons. Therefore, they can have that effect only if the goals are worth pursuing in the first place” (2005, 23). Suppose that one of my ends is to A, and that the only way to A is by B-ing. In that case, if I am functioning well as a rational agent, then I will either give up my end to A, or else I will B. That, however, is a claim about the structure of practical

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28 Unrestricted normative pluralism of the kind that Evan Tiffany (2007) and Derek Baker (forthcoming) endorse has a close affinity with epistemic instrumentalism. I am even tempted toward the view that unrestricted pluralism is tantamount to epistemic instrumentalism. However, the unrestricted normative pluralist thinks there are all sorts of reasons in domains that no one cares about that lack normative force. I discuss this in greater depth in chapter 4. Thanks to Derek Baker for helping me get clear on the relationship between normative instrumentalism and unrestricted normative pluralism.

29 Preemptive note to Mike Huemer: I am aware that an abstract theory like normative instrumentalism doesn’t “enjoy” anything, literally speaking.
rationality with regard to aims, not a claim about the source of practical reasons. What Raz calls the “facilitative principle,” on the other hand, does make substantive claims about practical reason. This principle says that if you have an undefeated reason to undertake a course of action, then you have a reason to undertake whatever would best facilitate that action (2005, 6). The facilitative principle differs from instrumentalism because it holds independently of the agent’s ends, or recognition that the desirable action to perform really is desirable.

Warren Quinn attacks the “Humean theory of practical rationality” – i.e., normative instrumentalism – from a different angle. He argues that normative instrumentalism is deficient as a theory of practical rationality because it makes rationality a morally unattractive quality. Quinn writes:

A rationality that would recommend a nasty choice is to that extent a nasty quality; a rationality that would recommend a cowardly choice is to that extend cowardly; and so on. This ought to give the neo-Humean pause. For whatever else we may be prepared to say of human reason at its most excellent, it seems that we must shrink from saying that it could be nasty or cowardly. (1993, 210-255)

Intuitively, rationality is not like this. This seems to Quinn, and to me, like a good reason for rejecting normative instrumentalism. However, I don’t expect that it

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will be persuasive to the moral anti-realist interlocutor that I am hoping to persuade, since he can be expected to simply accept this counterintuitive implication about rationality. In any event, it would be preferable if we could critique epistemic instrumentalism on narrower grounds, since it’s conceivable that epistemic instrumentalism could be true even if general normative instrumentalism is not. Are there any grounds on which one might adopt epistemic instrumentalism that do not entail a commitment to normative instrumentalism?

6.2 Cowie’s Argument for Epistemic Instrumentalism

Cowie attempts to provide an argument of this kind. Cowie is dissatisfied with the argument from naturalism primarily because it’s not clear to him that all versions of epistemic instrumentalism really are compatible with naturalism, or that all of the rival views to epistemic instrumentalism are incompatible with naturalism. His alternative argument for epistemic instrumentalism, the Argument from Coincidence, proceeds from the observation that “having true beliefs is of great practical utility. This is because having true beliefs is a good means of facilitating the goals that one possesses, or should possess” (2014, 4007). He continues:

The problem that I have in mind is that the intrinsicalist [i.e., someone who thinks that evidence-based epistemic reasons have intrinsic, rather than derivative, normativity] is committed to positing a striking coincidence. The intrinsicalist is committed to the existence of both a practical value and a
quite independently brutely epistemic value in believing in accordance with one’s evidence. This is a very striking coincidence: there happens to be a brutely epistemic value in forming beliefs in a fashion that quite independently is already of great practical utility (and hence, value). Whilst accidents—even fortunate ones—do happen, this is a striking one indeed. At the very least, it is a coincidence that calls out for an explanation from the intrinsicalist. (2015, 4007-8)

I take the following to be a faithful reconstruction of Cowie’s argument:

**Argument from Coincidence**

1. If intrinsicalism is true, (i.e., if instrumentalism is false), then we have two different kinds of reasons, epistemic and practical, for believing true things.

2. If we have both epistemic and practical reasons for believing true things, then this would have to result from a “striking coincidence.”

3. A striking coincidence of this sort or of this magnitude is implausible, so the consequent of 2 is probably false.

Therefore, intrinsicalism is probably false / instrumentalism is probably true.
1 is unobjectionable, and 3 appears to be analytic truth (a striking coincidence is by definition improbable). 2, however, is dubious. Why should it be a striking coincidence that our reasons are systemically over-determined? This seems to be true in a lot of domains. Prudential reasons, by which I mean self-interested reasons, and moral reasons often overlap. Robbing a bank is immoral; my doing that would also potentially be detrimental to my career as a moral philosopher. Nor is that case exceptional. If we have reasons of etiquette – and not “etiquette” of a kind that is thoroughly saturated with nods to racist norms or something of that nature – then presumably these etiquette reasons will overlap with our moral reasons in most cases. The same goes for moral reasons and legal reasons, if there are any irreducible legal reasons (which I doubt).

We should not be surprised by any of this. Our default assumption, I submit, should be that reason is at least somewhat unified. (I argue for the conclusion that reason is so unified in chapter 5). Moreover, in order for us to know that some occurrence is a “striking coincidence” we have to know about the background probabilities of it happening. But the general categories of things that we have epistemic and moral reason to do (e.g., believe true things and abstain from harming people, respectively) seem to be necessarily true. There isn’t a possible world in which I have most epistemic reason to believe as many falsehoods as I can. There may not be a possible world in which it would be in my self-interest to keep running into solid objects, believing that they are not there (or if there is, then it is a very distant one from the actual world). We have no background assumptions that
justify the claim that the correspondence between epistemic and practical reasons is a striking coincidence. Indeed, it’s the only way things could have gone.\(^{31}\)

An alternative way of cashing out Cowie’s argument is as follows:

**Argument from Coincidence***

1. If intrinsicalism is true, (i.e., if instrumentalism is false), then we have two different kinds of reasons, epistemic and practical, for believing true things.
2. If we have both epistemic and practical reasons for believing true things, then our reasons for believing true things are systematically overdetermined.
3. We should avoid positing systematic over-determination (i.e., over-determination of that kind is implausible).

Therefore, intrinsicalism is probably false / instrumentalism is probably true.

In this version of the argument, 1 and 2 are airtight, but 3 is suspect. Why should we avoid positing systematic over-determination? We have seen, in response to the previous version of this argument, that there appear to be plenty of cases in which our normative reasons are systematically over-determined. Moreover, how strong is the presumption against positing systematic over-determination supposed

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\(^{31}\) I want to say something similar in response to Sharon Street’s (2005) evolutionary debunking argument against value realism, according to which it would be an astonishing coincidence if our minds, the products of value-indifferent evolution, were able to perceive realistically-construed value facts.
to be? We also plausibly have a presumption in favor of preserving the appearance that we may be subject to unfavorable epistemic assessments for failing to believe something in cases in which we have no practical reason to believe it. I see no non-question-begging reason that can be given for thinking that the presumption against positing systematic over-determination overrides the presumption against preserving the appearances in this case. So I find this version of the argument to be no more convincing than the first.

### 6.3 The Case Against Epistemic Instrumentalism

The standard argument against epistemic instrumentalism per se is that we can easily imagine cases in which epistemic and practical reasons diverge and when this happens, epistemic reasons appear to retain their force. As Thomas Kelly writes:

> Perhaps the most serious reason for skepticism about the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality is this: what a person has reason to believe does not seem to depend on the content of his or her goals in the way that one would expect if the instrumentalist conception were correct. (2003, 621)

Two kinds of examples are usually brought forward to show this. First are cases of true beliefs or knowledge that are intuitively worthless (e.g., the number of 32 See e.g., Thomas Kelly (2003, 18-20) and Côté-Bouchard (2015, 5).
blades of grass in the quad, the number of moles on Adlai Stevenson’s back on March 4, 1956). Second are cases of knowledge that seem actually detrimental to the agent’s interests (e.g., knowledge of the surprising ending of a movie you want to see before you see it). In both kinds of example, if an agent acquires evidence that the trivial claim, or the thing she desires not to know about, is true, then she (intuitively) has an epistemic reason to believe it despite the fact that believing it does not further her ends. The challenge for the instrumentalist is to account for this intuition, or to find some way of neutralizing it.33

There are three main lines of reply to this objection. The first is for the normative instrumentalist to adopt error theory about epistemic reasons; however, I have already considered that possibility and found it untenable. The second, which Schroeder advances, is to insist, contrary to the appearances, that even in these cases, the true beliefs do promote the agent’s interests to at least some degree since any true belief could conceivably come to bear on an agent’s practical interests. Considering a hypothetical example of Mary, who wants to buy a new pair of shoes, he writes:

Now there are plenty of topics which don’t bear directly on how to succeed in acquiring a new pair of shoes. For example, it is hard to see the connection between buying a new pair of shoes and knowing that my brother lives in Los Angeles, or knowing how many moons circle Jupiter. But of those topics that

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33 Note that this objection applies to the version of epistemic instrumentalism according to which epistemic reasons are instrumental to an agent’s own well-being regardless of her ends.
don’t bear directly on buying shoes, some do bear quite directly on questions that are relevant to buying shoes. Being in error about them could lead one to form the wrong beliefs about matters that it is important to be right about, in order for one’s shoe-acquiring to go smoothly. And now consider the class of propositions, being in error about which can affect whether one is right about one of these questions. And so on. A relatively weak hypothesis about the holism of belief formation says that the closure of this process will include every proposition (2007, 114)

Côté-Bouchard refers to this as the “optimistic response” because it implies optimism about the utility of true beliefs.34 The problem with this reply, is that it’s difficult to justify the claim that all true beliefs promote our interests without relying on an exceptionally weak notion of what it is to promote someone’s interest, thereby trivializing epistemic normativity. Tristram McPherson objects that Schroeder, in order to preserve the intuition that we have at least some reason to believe all truths, is also committed to saying that we have at least some practical reason to perform all actions. After all, any action could end up promoting our interests in some conceivable case (2012, 47). Côté-Bouchard fleshes out this objection with his own colorful example: “Is there really a reason for me to, e.g., jump out of my window while eating two bananas and singing happy birthday to John Travolta in a batman costume?” (2015, 345). The rhetorical question is

34 Note that the optimistic response is consistent with saying that the instrumental goodness of a true belief can be outweighed by other factors
intended to elicit a negative answer; however, he and I seem to be at an intuitive impasse about this case.

The third strategy for dealing with this objection is to deny that the intuition that epistemic reason is binding in the case in which it doesn’t further our ends. In such cases, we continue to have epistemic reasons to believe certain things, but these “reasons” amount to mere D-reasons, or what Côté-Bouchard refers to as “pseudo-reasons” since they are not backed up with anything that has genuine normativity (2015, 343). I think that this is the instrumentalist’s best response to the problem of epistemic reasons that apparently do nothing to further our ends. But can we really make sense of epistemic reasons being pseudo-reasons? Consider the following pair of cases:

*Financial renunciation.* Brother Noah is a monk in the Franciscan Order who takes a vow of poverty, to avoid ungodly wealth and greed. Noah worked on Wall Street before he went into religious life, so he understands capitalism and finances very well. Nonetheless, having taken a vow of poverty, he no longer regards the domain of financial reasons as having any normative authority over what he should do. When a friend offers to make a highly profitable trade on his behalf, Noah says: “I realize that I have a strong financial reason to do that; however, I don’t have any real reason to take those reasons into consideration.”
Epistemic renunciation. Brother Isaiah is a monk in the Order of the Holy Faith who takes a vow of ignorance and irrationality in order to help ward off the sin of intellectual pride and to increase his reliance on faith. Before he went into religious life, Isaiah was a scientist, so he understands rational inquiry and evidence very well. Nonetheless, having taken a vow of ignorance, he no longer regards the domain of epistemic reasons as having any normative authority over what he should believe. When a friend offers highly convincing evidence that an important scientific claim is true, Isaiah says: “I realize that I have strong epistemic reasons to believe that; however, I don’t have any real reason to take those epistemic reasons into consideration while forming my opinion.”

I have different reactions to these cases. Noah’s response seems rational – given his beliefs – in a way that Isaiah’s does not. I can make sense of someone treating the financial domain as being a system of mere D-reasons in a way that does not make sense with epistemic reason. If I renounce the domain of financial reasons, then I can disregard financial reasons without making myself vulnerable to the charge of irrationality. Whereas, if I disregard epistemic reasons, I am vulnerable to that charge whether or not I choose to regard the epistemic domain as authoritative. It cannot be just that Noah is financially irrational, but that Isaiah is epistemically irrational in univocal senses of “irrational.” That does not account of
the asymmetry of the cases. Epistemic rationality, unlike financial rationality, seems to be a component of rationality *simpliciter*.

I anticipate two objections to this. The first is that given that Isaiah is described as being a good reasoner, he probably can’t help but believe in accordance with evidence once it is brought to his attention. But suppose we stipulate – granted, unrealistically – that Isaiah *can* withhold judgment in cases like this. Perhaps he has acquired skills in redirecting his mind so as to acquire as few important new true beliefs as possible in order to keep his vow. I think that even if he could refrain from forming new true beliefs he *shouldn’t*, and in a non-trivial sense of “should.” This is a reason for thinking that epistemic rationality is a part of rationality *simpliciter*, rather than being instrumental. To be epistemically irrational is one way of being irrational *full stop*. This view of course requires the rejection of normative pluralism, according to which nothing is irrational *full stop*, but only irrational relative to this or that standard. I argue against that view in chapter 5. For now, however, I will proceed as if the falsity of normative pluralism has already been established.

The second objection is this. Imagine that God is going to send Isaiah to hell for breaking his oath (or at least that Isaiah believes this). In that case, supposing that there is such a thing as rationality *simpliciter*, or all-things-considered rationality, it seems that Isaiah would indeed be rational to disregard epistemic reasons while forming his beliefs. I don’t disagree with this; however, I dispute that it is in conflict with my general conclusion that there is a difference between the two
cases. If God were to send Noah to hell for responding to financial reasons, he would not be commanding Noah to be irrational. But if He were to command Isaiah not to respond to epistemic reasons on pain of hellfire, Isaiah would have to be irrational to at least some degree in order to comply. That is true even though, all things considered, compliance would be the most rational thing to do.

5. Conclusion
In this chapter I argued for epistemic realism indirectly by challenging what I took to be the two most plausible alternatives: normative error theory (specifically epistemic error theory) and epistemic instrumentalism. I introduced the Self-Defeat Argument against normative error theory and considered two ways that the error theorist might resist it. First, he might try to cash out epistemic reasons in descriptive terms. Second, the error theorist might embrace Self-Defeat. I have argued that both strategies prove untenable. The Self-Defeat Argument provides us both with good reasons to reject error theory and with good reasons for thinking that it is false. I then turned my attention to epistemic instrumentalism. My primary strategy for arguing against epistemic instrumentalism is to argue that epistemic rationality appears to be part of rationality simpliciter; hence it cannot be merely instrumentally valuable. This argument, of course, relies on the notion that there is such a thing as rationality simpliciter to begin with. I will return to that issue in chapter 5. In the next two chapters I will shift my focus to defending the Parity Premise.
Chapter 3: Epistemic Value and Moral Realism

We have seen that epistemology, unlike psychology, appears to be a normative enterprise. Epistemologists do not merely want to explain why we happen to have the beliefs that we have. They want to know what beliefs we ought to hold, what cognitive states we should be in. What grounds epistemic normativity? Three answers seem exhaustive of the likely possibilities. The first is what I will call “epistemic moralism,” the idea that epistemic normativity is grounded in moral normativity. Examples of epistemic moralism include the virtue epistemology of Linda Zabzebski (1996, 2003), Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007) and others. W.K. Clifford can be read as an epistemic moralist in his paper, “The Ethics of Belief” (1878/1999), because he never clearly distinguishes moral and epistemic senses of “ought.” Other examples abound.35 Clearly, if epistemic moralism is correct, then realism about epistemic normativity implies realism about moral normativity. The second possibility, epistemic instrumentalism, is the idea that epistemic normativity derives from practical normativity. I have already argued against this view in the previous chapter.

I turn my attention now to the third possibility: epistemic normativity is not accredited by anything outside of itself. Cowie uses the term “intrinsicalism” to refer to the view that there exists some “brutely epistemic normative truth relating belief to evidence, or to some other epistemic property such as truth, or epistemic

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35 Descartes’s view in his fourth meditation, according to which error occurs only when human beings judge beyond their capacity to clearly and distinctly perceive the truth, also seems to be a version of epistemic moralism. After all, he attributes all positive epistemic errors to the will (1998, 98-105).
rationality” (2014, 4004). I will adopt his terminology. As I understand it, two different kinds of views fall under the heading of “intrinsicalism.” The first is that there are brute epistemic normative facts, such as that it is epistemically bad to believe a contradictory proposition, or to believe without evidence. It would be awkward for a moral anti-realist to believe that there are realistically-construed epistemic rules of this kind, although that combination of positions is not logically inconsistent. We would be in our rights to ask: “if you are willing to posit brute epistemic facts, then why not think that there are brute moral reasons as well?” The other available version of intrinsicalism, which I consider here, is that epistemic normativity is grounded in a non-derivative, distinctively epistemic kind of value. I will refer to this as the “Epistemic Value Thesis” (EVT).

My project in this chapter is to provide an argument in favor of the Parity Premise. I will do this by working out the implications of EVT and showing that any epistemic realist who accepts it should also accept moral realism. The argument in a nutshell is this. Consider what relationship, or relationships, must obtain between a cognitive state and epistemic value (either the value itself, in the abstract, or an instance of that value) in order for that cognitive state to count as epistemically justified, or epistemically virtuous in some respect. Suppose that cognitive states count as epistemically good so long as they promote the epistemic value. In that case, some actions will also count as good or bad based on whether, and to what degree, they promote the epistemic value. So the same value, or values, that ground epistemic assessments also provide us with grounds for evaluating actions. Further
reasoning will show that it makes sense to call these evaluations ethical evaluations. Since EVT is a plausible account of epistemic normativity, we have defeasible grounds for thinking that moral and epistemic realism stand or fall together.

1. The Epistemic Value Thesis

A number of philosophers have thought that epistemic normativity derives from a particularly epistemic form of value. Stephen R. Grimm calls this “teleological account” of epistemic appraisal. He describes it as follows (without endorsing it):

A belief earns positive marks (counts as justified, rational, virtuous, etc.) from an epistemic point of view, just in case it does well with respect to the things with intrinsic epistemic value (i.e. helps to promote them or bring them about). Likewise, a belief earns negative marks just in case it does poorly with respect to the things with intrinsic epistemic value. (2009, 246)

Brian Talbot, who endorses a version of the teleological account, writes:

If the reasons and rules that generate epistemic oughts do pass normative force on to these oughts, they get this force from someplace. It may be that some kinds of reasons just have their force, that their authoritativeness is brute (moral reasons are a plausible candidate), but that isn’t plausible for epistemic reasons. They get their force from their connection to the epistemic
end. That is, epistemic reasons have their force because they promote the epistemic end. (2014, 603)

It is unclear why Talbot thinks that brute epistemic reasons are any less plausible than brute moral reasons, which is presumably a possibility. The idea that epistemic normativity is grounded in epistemic value is, however, plausible enough to be worth exploring on its own merits. Like Grimm, Talbot does not identify which cognitive states are epistemically valuable, but he notes that most agree that epistemic value is closely related to true belief (2014, 5). Recently defended candidates include true belief (Lynch 2004), knowledge (Conee 1992), understanding (Kvanvig 2003, 2009) and verisimilitude, or “truthlikeness” (Oddie 1986, 2008, and 2017). Epistemic value may in principle be conceived as being either an intrinsic or a derivative source of normativity, though if it is derivatively a source of normativity it cannot provide an ultimate explanation for why epistemic reasons have normative authority. Here I am interested in EVT, the idea that epistemic value is the ultimate source of epistemic normativity.

Although this seems to be a natural view to have about epistemic normativity, clear endorsements of EVT are hard to come by. Many philosophers say things that are compatible with it, but I am aware of no one who clearly endorses it. I think that is because the question of what cognitive states are epistemically valuable tends to be taken up separately from the question of what the ultimate grounds of epistemic normativity are. For example, Michael P. Lynch
writes that "There are times in our lives when we simply want to know for no other reason than the knowing itself. Curiosity is not always motivated by practical concerns" as when we are curious to know the truth of mathematical conjectures. (2004, 15-16). That could mean either that the knowledge is intrinsically valuable, or that it is normatively significant only because, and to the extent that, we desire to have it, so that epistemic normativity derives from means-end practical rationality. Oddie comes closer to endorsing EVT when he writes: “Each cognitive state has a (pure) cognitive value which it is the aim of a rational agent, qua pure inquirer, to maximize” (1997, 535). The words “qua pure inquirer” introduce some ambiguity, however, since it is not clear what sort of reason we have to be pure inquirers. Maybe the epistemic reasons apply to us “as pure inquirers” in the same way that legal reasons apply to us “as citizens.” Only if we assume that the reasons that apply to us as pure inquirers are categorical, or that our identities as inquirers is inescapable, does this amount to an endorsement of EVT.

Nonetheless, EVT seems like a natural view to have about epistemic normativity and many philosophers say things that are compatible with it, so it’s worth exploring the implications of EVT.

2. EVT and morality

The following argument shows that EVT has metaethical implications:
The Shared Grounds Argument

1. If there are epistemic reasons for belief, then there is some epistemic value that un-derivatively grounds those reasons. (EVT)

2. If there is some epistemic value that un-derivatively grounds epistemic reasons, then that same value grounds some practical reasons of the same level of robustness.

   C1: Therefore, if there are epistemic reasons for belief, then there are some practical reasons whose normativity is derivative from epistemic value.

3. Some of those reasons are moral reasons.

   C2: Therefore, if there are epistemic reasons, then there are moral reasons of the same level of robustness.

Since my task is to draw out the implications of EVT, I must offer defenses of 2 and 3. Let us consider each in turn.

2.1 Epistemic value and practical reason

What epistemic value-related reasons do we have? Before we answer that question, we should investigate what sort of epistemic value-related reasons we have in general. Consequentialists emphasize that our moral reasons derive from a duty to promote moral value. Shelly Kagan writes that “all else being equal, we should pick the option with the best results. We should pick the act that best promotes the good” (1998, 26). Most moral philosophers seem to believe that we have at least
some reasons to promote moral value, but many think that promotion does not exhaust the ways that we should respond to moral value. Widely-held intuitions aver that we should not promote moral value by any means necessary – e.g., executing an innocent man to prevent a riot from taking place that would likely claim more than one life, or killing one healthy person in order to redistribute his organs to save the lives of several others who need transplants. I will not wade into the debate between consequentialists and deontologists here. Rather I will attempt to show that my conclusions follow regardless which of these moral theories we accept.

A few philosophers have explored a thoroughly consequentialist approach to epistemology, according to which our epistemic reasons derive entirely from value promotion. Talbot, for example, argues that epistemic value sometimes confers “non-evidential, truth-promoting reasons to believe” upon certain mental states. Having an inflated self-image, for example, can be prudentially good for people, evidence suggests, and being better off overall puts people in a better position to learn new things. So some false beliefs could pay epistemic dividends later on (2016, 600). Talbot further argues that our epistemic value-derived reasons for having these beliefs plausibly constitute epistemic reasons to believe, since they are reasons in virtue of the fact that they promote the epistemic end. Alternatively, if truth-promoting, non-evidential reasons are not epistemic reasons proper, then they are

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36 For an exception see Philippa Foot (1988, 227). Foot seems to think that the notion of the value of a state is not well defined.
37 See e.g., Judith Jarvis Thomson (1985).
more normatively important than epistemic reasons. After all, in such cases the truth-promoting, non-evidential reasons for belief promote the epistemic end to a greater degree than epistemic reasons, and epistemic reasons derive all of their authority from epistemic value (610-5).

Susanna Rinard, thinking along similar lines, argues that there should be “no exception for belief” meaning that whatever normative principle governs action also governs belief in the same way. For example, if it is reasonable to make practical decisions based upon expected utility, then it’s also reasonable to decide what to believe entirely based upon expected utility. Note that here the only role that epistemic value plays is that it contributes to total value; it has no special relationship with epistemic reasons (or if it does by virtue of stipulation, then epistemic reasons have no special authority over what we should believe all things considered). This view has extremely counter-intuitive implications, which Rinard does not hesitate to embrace. She claims, for example, that even contradictory beliefs can be rational provided that such beliefs are productive of overall greater value than consistent beliefs: “The idea that there is anything inherently wrong with believing contradictions is just a symptom of evidentialist thinking” (2015, 17).

I am not an evidentialist – indeed, I will argue against evidentialism in the following chapter – but I suppose that I must have fallen victim to evidentialist thinking in this regard!

If epistemic value is intrinsically valuable, then we have reason, or reasons – of some sort – to promote it, according to Talbot and Rinard. There are good reasons
to think that this general obligation would have to have implications for practical reason. Consider the reasons that philosophers give to support the claim that we generally ought to promote moral value. For example, in a rescue case in which no available rescue option involves inflicting harm on anyone and other costs are similar, it seems clear that we should choose whatever option will save the greatest number of people. What moral principle lies behind this intuition? A plausible inference to the best explanation is that we should save the greatest number of people because doing so would promote the greatest total amount of moral value. We could make the principle weaker by adding “...and there are no competing costs.” If the only relevant difference between two actions is that one promotes more moral value than the other, then the value-promoting action should be preferred. That principle seems to generalize to other forms of intrinsic value. So if epistemic value is a form of intrinsic value, then we should increase it rather than diminish it, all else equal.

Consider also Samuel Scheffler’s “paradox of deontology,” which purports to show that there is something absurd about the idea that we could ever have the most moral reason to do any action other than the one that maximizes moral value:

For how can it be rational to forbid the performance of a morally objectionable action that would have the effect of minimizing the total number of objectionable actions that were performed and would have no
other morally relevant consequences? How can the minimization of morally objectionable conduct be morally unacceptable? (1988, 244)

These are rhetorical questions and Scheffler is inviting us to conclude that minimizing morally bad conduct could not be morally unacceptable. Parallel reasoning could support the conclusion that actions which do the most to promote epistemic value could not be epistemically irrational. If false beliefs are epistemically bad, then it seems we should, in some sense of should – perhaps epistemically – do whatever results in the smallest number of false beliefs (or maximizes the epistemic good according to the true metric, whatever that happens to be) even if that means believing something false immediately. We pay an epistemic cost up front for a larger epistemic gain the long run. That’s counterintuitive, but if it’s right, and we do have reasons to promote epistemic value, then epistemic value has practical implications. It means, on any plausible account of epistemic value, that gaining an education, educating others, and telling the truth under oath are actions we have reason to perform. By the same token, burning libraries to the ground for amusement, spreading malicious rumors, and telling lies are actions we should avoid.

Given the counterintuitive conclusions to which Talbot and Rinard are committed, however, it seems that promotion is not exhaustive of the appropriate ways of responding to epistemic value. Most of us, contra Rinard, do not think that it is rational to believe a contradiction to increase the number of true beliefs that we
have. Nor, to use another proposed counterexample to epistemic consequentialism, could it be epistemically rational for a person to believe that he will recover from an illness merely because doing so increases the likelihood of his survival and adding to his stock of true beliefs (Firth 1998, 259–71; Berker 2013, 369-70). These intuitions against epistemic consequentialism are analogous to the intuitions that are frequently mustered against direct act consequentialism in the moral domain – e.g., it seems wrong to conduct painful and involuntary medical experiments on an innocent person for the benefit of others. It seems to me that the intuitions against epistemic consequentialism are more forceful than their moral counterparts. I have an easier time believing that it could be moral to do something dreadful for the greater good than that it can be epistemically rational to believe something that is unsupported by evidence, contrary to the evidence, or even outright contradictory, in order to promote a greater number of epistemically virtuous cognitive states in the long run.

So, as Selim Berker says, “epistemic normativity cannot be reduced to a set of epistemic values (or, equivalently, a set of epistemic goals) that are all ‘to be promoted’” (2013, 379). The epistemic consequentialist could take a page from rule consequentialism in ethics and make the connection between epistemic reasons and epistemic value indirect. On this view, a belief bears epistemic value if and only if it is formed in accordance with the set of doxastic rules that are generally the most productive of epistemic value is epistemically justified for that reason. Just as adopting rule consequentialism allows the consequentialist to avoid standard
counter-examples to direct act consequentialism, so does adopting indirect epistemic consequentialism allow the epistemic consequentialist to avoid these counterexamples. After all, the best set of doxastic rules presumably includes such strictures as “do not believe contradictory propositions” and “form beliefs in accordance with the evidence.”

Indirect epistemic consequentialism, no less than direct epistemic consequentialism, has implications for action. Just as there are certain doxastic rules that generate epistemic value and minimize epistemic disvalue, so are there investigative, pedagogical and dialectical practices that do the same. For example, seeking out information from a variety of sources and being open-minded when listening to divergent points of view tend to insulate the investigator from the risk of self-deception, at least especially egregious forms of it. Presumably investigative actions that are in accord with these practices are in some sense better than those that are not and for precisely the same reason that some beliefs are epistemically better than others. So epistemic consequentialism has implications for practical reason regardless of whether it is direct or indirect.

A more radical alternative to direct epistemic consequentialism is what we might call “epistemic deontology,” the idea that our epistemic reasons are fundamentally rule-based. If basic epistemic rules function as side constraints limiting what we may do to promote epistemic value – which we still have reason to do – then on this view we have consequentialist reasons when these constraints don’t apply. Hence we still have epistemic-moral entanglement of the kind I’ve
described. On the other hand a purely deontic account of epistemic normativity that did not include any positive duty to acquire new epistemically virtuous beliefs would be a form of intrinsicalism that is incompatible with EVT.

We can in principle conceive of a minimal set of epistemic rules that would have no clear implications for either moral or broadly practical normativity. But I think we should demand an argument for why that we should think that epistemic normativity is like this. Why think that our epistemic duties don’t include any duty not to commit perjury, or that they wouldn’t direct us to take some significant personal risks in order to expose some form of institutional deceit? If our epistemic duties are grounded epistemic value – which we must respect – then it’s plausible that we can respect, or fail to respect, epistemic value through our actions. I am aware of no principled way an epistemic deontologist can rule out that we have such duties without begging against the claim that epistemic norms are potentially practically relevant.

To summarize what I have said in this section, if epistemic value is a form of intrinsic value, then we have reason either to promote it, directly or indirectly, or to respect it. I think that we most likely have some combination of respect-related and promotion-related reasons. Whatever we think about the kinds of reasons we have with regard to epistemic value, at least some of our epistemic value-related reasons are going to be practical reasons. Actions can increase or diminish the amount of epistemic value in the world. Actions can respect or fail to respect epistemic value.
Thus EVT entails that we have at least some practical reasons that are grounded in epistemic value.

2.2 Epistemic value and moral reasons

I now turn my attention from (2) to (3), the claim that the practical reasons grounded in epistemic value are best understood as ethical reasons. First consider an inference to the best explanation. The practical reasons that derive from epistemic value would overlap substantially with the recommendations of commonsense morality. Both the moral and epistemic perspectives recommend that we not lie in most circumstances, say that pursuing scientific and other forms of scholarly knowledge are praiseworthy pursuits, and so on. Moreover, the practical reasons we have with regard to epistemic value are duties to promote or respect impersonal value, which seems characteristic of the moral point of view. These substantial commonalities provide some reason for thinking that these practical reasons simply are moral reasons. Just as some of our reasons can be described as being simultaneously prudential and moral (e.g., refraining from needless self-harm), some of our reasons may be simultaneously moral and epistemic.

We might object that moral reasons must derive from distinctively moral value; without moral value per se, there is no morality, though there might be practical reasons of a non-moral sort. Different standards can of course converge in their recommendations without thereby being the same standard. But consider another thought experiment (there will be more of these to come, as you may have suspected). Suppose that we discovered that were no other normative reasons
except those that derive from epistemic value – would we then be committed to
moral error theory? I think it would be strange to say that we would be left with
moral error theory if we knew that we had practical reasons that derived from
realistically-construed, impersonal value, and that these reasons overlapped with
the recommendations of commonsense morality to a considerable degree. We would
certainly be left with a very peculiar moral system, one that would prioritize
increasing knowledge over responding to the suffering of others – indeed, it would
give the latter no weight at all. We would have to revise our concept of morality in
light of this discovery in the way science occasionally forces us to revise our concepts
(e.g., “planet”). Nevertheless, we would still have genuinely moral truth in this
scenario.

A second argument for (3), which is reminiscent of Socrates’ defense of the
unity of the virtues (Protagoras 328d-334c), requires more elaboration. I want to
elicit intuitions to show that a morally ideal person would not disregard intrinsic
value of any kind. Imagine a virtuous person who recognizes that one form of non-
instrumental value is aesthetic value. One action would lead to the destruction of a
tremendous amount of aesthetic value (or else it would exemplify a tremendous
amount of disrespect toward that value) and another would not. I submit that, if
these were the only normatively significant differences between the actions, we
would not expect a virtuous agent to decide what to do on the basis of a coin flip. We
would expect him to choose the action that would respect or promote aesthetic
value.
Parallel reasoning about the extremely vicious seems to hold. We would not expect the morally worst person who ever lived to be deeply concerned with beauty for its own sake. The willingness of so-called “Islamic State” fighters to destroy the beautiful art of “infidel” cultures speaks to their badness. We can of course imagine villains with cultivated tastes in wine, classical music, etc. We might think that these villains seem even morally worse, if anything, because of their cultivated aesthetic tastes. That may be due to the fact that these cultivated tastes highlight the calculated nature of their actions. Indeed, there are some kinds of aesthetic appreciation that seem to require a moral sensibility. Gratuitously violent art is not beautiful and some moral sense is required to determine what is and is not gratuitous. A villain who is conversant about the subtleties of a Tolstoy novel is especially chilling because we expect him to have knowledge of the wrongness of his actions. But I think our moral judgment of such a villain would be mitigated somewhat if we learned that he would undergo personal sacrifice to preserve some piece of art that is genuinely beautiful; there is at least something good to be said about him. Imagine a villain who would not sacrifice for beauty, but who is otherwise identical, and you will have imagined an even worse person.

Similar things can be said about epistemic value, I believe. The morally worst person we can imagine would not care about truth, knowledge, or understanding – except inasmuch as these things have instrumental value for him – while the morally best person we can imagine would be someone who cares about these things in a way that transcends his own interests. The fact that we expect
moral virtue to be correlated with concern for some form of value, and moral vice to be correlated with lack of concern, or even hostility toward that value, does not entail that this value has moral significance. But what it suggests is that morality involves affording at least some kind of respect to everything that is intrinsically valuable. So it is plausible that if there are practical reasons that derive from epistemic value, at least some of these reasons count as moral reasons.

2.3 An Objection

I can imagine a critical interlocutor, perhaps even James Dreier, raising the following objection:

You claim that realistically-construed facts about epistemic value entail that there are moral facts of the same level of robustness. It is the latter claim that I take issue with. Suppose that a certain community regards it as rude to believe things that are unjustified. In that case, epistemic facts about justification would entail certain etiquette facts. It’s clear, however, that these etiquette facts don’t have the same level of robustness as the realistically-construed epistemic facts are supposed to have because they depend on convention. But the reasoning here seems parallel to the reasoning to that you use to “prove” that realistically-construed facts about epistemic

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38 Prof. Dreier raised this objection to an earlier version of this paper at the American Philosophical Association Central Division Meeting at Chicago, February 21, 2018.
value entail moral facts of the same level of robustness. So something appears to be wrong with your reasoning.

I think the best response to this objection is to begin by considering why a similar objection couldn’t work against my more modest claim that realistically-construed epistemic facts entail realistically-construed practical facts. All that it is to be a realistically-construed practical fact is that it be the case that (1) there is some reason that relates to what action some agent should take in some circumstance and (2) this is grounded in something objective (i.e., something not based on desire or social construction) such as objective value. The epistemic value-based reasons that I’ve argued for meet both criteria; therefore, if my reasoning is sound, then realistically-construed epistemic facts entail facts about practical normativity of the same level of robustness. Clearly, I do not beg the question against anti-realism about practical reasoning in saying this.

The same kind of reasoning works in the moral case, I submit. Consider what we would need to know, beyond (1) and (2), in order to know that some of these realistically-construed practical facts count as realistically-construed moral facts. What, in other words, would take us from practical realism to moral reason? My suggestion is that we need to know (3), that some of the realistically-construed reasons satisfy our commonsense moral notions well enough. I argued in the previous section that at least some of the epistemic value-based reasons satisfy (3). If that’s right, then the moral facts entailed by the existence of epistemic facts must
be realistically-construed. Is it question-begging that (3) doesn’t include any stipulation to the effect that moral facts must be relative to culture and convention? I don’t think so. It would be begging the question against those views to stipulate that facts about social construction together with (1) or (2) could ever be *sufficient* for some practical facts to count as moral facts. But it isn’t begging the question against those views to insist that if objective values ground moral normativity, then morality is objective.

3. What is epistemically valuable?

So far I have remained neutral on what cognitive states are bearers of epistemic value, although I have assumed that they will be from a relatively short list of truth-related options that I have considered (e.g., true belief, knowledge, understanding, truthlikeness). I think that when we consider which cognitive states bear epistemic value – and to what degree – we will find further evidence that epistemic and moral considerations are entangled. Certain epistemic values guarantee epistemic-moral entanglement, most obviously intellectual virtues like wisdom, love of knowledge, intellectual courage, and open-mindedness which clearly have a moral valence (e.g., Roberts and Wood (2007), Zabzebski (1996), Oddie (2009)). Realism about certain forms of epistemic value, those that are morally thick, straightforwardly entails moral realism.

Other plausible epistemic values, like true belief and knowledge, are not conceptually linked with morality in the same way, but there are nevertheless
reasons for thinking that they are intertwined with ethical value. Philosophers who think that epistemic normativity derives from epistemic value struggle with the problem that some true beliefs, and some pieces of knowledge, appear to be worthless – e.g., knowledge of the information contained in a long-expired Detroit phonebook, of the number of blades of grass currently on the quad, and of other trivia. Grimm puts the point as follows: “How should we make sense of our epistemic appraisals with respect to those beliefs or, better, those topics that apparently lack intrinsic epistemic value – that is, that are not interesting or important, from a purely epistemic point of view?” (2009, 259)

Some of the proposed solutions to this problem bring practical reason, and plausibly ethical reasoning, into the picture. For example, Lynch writes:

Come on, [an interlocutor might say] what about really trivial truths? Surely there are all sorts of true beliefs that I could have that are not even *prima facie* good. But the fact that I shouldn’t bother with those sorts of beliefs doesn’t mean that it isn’t still *prima facie* good to believe even the most trivial truth. (2004, 55)

In other words, it might be *prima facie* good for me to know how many blades of grass are in the quad even though it will almost certainly not be worth the

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39 Côté-Bouchard (2017) argues that this problem is insurmountable for anyone who thinks that epistemic normativity is grounded in epistemic value. He doesn’t, however, consider the possibility that epistemic value might be entangled with other kinds of value in the way that I am describing.
opportunity cost for me to count them in order to acquire that knowledge, so it is not
*ultima facie* good for me to have that belief. My point is that we cannot plausibly
distinguish those beliefs that are worth the effort to uncover from those that are not
without making reference to practical considerations. We need to know both the
significance of the belief itself, which includes its practical significance, and also
whether there are any competing goods that are more worthy of the agent’s
attention. Plausibly some of those goods will be ethical goods. So Lynch’s way of
getting around the trivial value problem plausibly implicates practical and ethical
distinctions among truths.

An alternative solution to this problem to modify the axiology to avoid the
counter-example, which is to adopt what Grimm calls a restricted or qualified
version of the teleological view, so that trivial true beliefs do not count as
epistemically valuable. Alvin Goldman, for example, claims that the “core epistemic
value is a high degree of truth possession on *topics of interest*” (2002, 61). Since the
number of blades of grass on the quad is not a topic of interest, a true belief about
this would not have any epistemic value. Grimm is unsatisfied with this response.
The basic problem, he writes,

... is that it loses track of the fact that not just any sort of good was supposed
to ground the teleological account, but rather a good that was distinctively
‘epistemic’; in other words, a good we took to be intrinsically worth realizing
from a ‘purely’ epistemic point of view or (apparently) simply insofar as we were curious beings. (2009, 251)

Grimm’s point does not represent a problem for friends of the teleological view per se. It is a problem only for those who also accept epistemic purism, the idea that “epistemic concepts are characterized to be pure and free from practical concerns” (Kim 2017, 1). They need not be. There is room for thinking that, say, knowledge is a distinctive epistemic value even though practical and moral values are relevant to determining the degree to which a given piece of knowledge has epistemic value. And I think that is what we should say: there are epistemic values to which moral and prudential values are relevant. Of course, those who are determined to preserve purism can bite the bullet and adopt what Grimm calls the “unrestricted view” of epistemic teleology according to which all true beliefs are equally epistemically valuable. But the unrestricted view is too counter-intuitive for me to accept. The best way to avoid it is to adopt some form of impurism. And this would mean that realism about epistemic value commits us to realism about other kinds of values, including moral values.

An alternative would be to try to differentiate the value of these cognitive states on purely epistemic grounds. One proposal for doing this might be that the greater amount of information content a belief has, the better it is epistemically.40 Another proposal of this kind include that some true beliefs, or sets of true beliefs,

40 Thanks to Graham Oddie for bringing this to my attention.
can be used to derive more true beliefs than other sets can be. Still another is that some true beliefs can be assessed for their elegance, or coherence with other true beliefs, independently of moral or practical concerns. But I don’t think that these or any other proposals of this kind will succeed in respecting our intuitions about the relative values of different beliefs. For example, knowing that a particular action is wrong seems very important to someone who must decide whether or not to perform it. On the other hand, knowing a single mathematical truth entails many other mathematical truths – perhaps an infinite number of them – and yet intuitively knowledge of it need not have much value. In short, I am suspicious that there is any way of treating the intuitively significant true beliefs as being genuinely significant without wildly inflating the worth of beliefs that seem not to have much value. I conclude that the best way to differentiate the value of beliefs is to adopt some form of epistemic impurism and allow that non-epistemic forms of value can be relevant to the degree to which cognitive states are epistemically valuable.

Conclusion

I have examined the metaethical implications of EVT, the idea that epistemic normativity derives from epistemic value, which is a form of intrinsic value. I have argued that if epistemic value grounds epistemic reasons, then it grounds some practical reasons as well. That is true regardless of whether the reasons that epistemic value gives us are construed as reasons to promote or reasons to respect epistemic value. Plausibly at least some of the practical reasons grounded in
epistemic value are moral reasons. An independent line of argument taken up in
section 3 was meant to support the same conclusion. There I argued that intuitions
about what sorts of cognitive states bear epistemic value, and to what degree, could
be plausibly be explained by moral-epistemic entanglement. This argument was
suggestive rather than decisive, however, since purist ways of accounting for that
intuition have not been ruled out (but have, I believe, been shown to be
implausible). If what I have argued is on point, then it should increase our
confidence in the claim that realism about epistemic reasons implies realism about
moral reasons.
Chapter 4: Two Entanglement Arguments for the Parity Premise

Both beliefs and actions can be assessed as being reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, good or bad. Some philosophers have thought that these commonalities are evidence for moral realism. After all, if epistemic and moral facts share all salient features, then the moral anti-realist cannot claim that moral facts are uniquely suspicious entities. If this reasoning is on point, then the best arguments against moral realism are not decisive given that we should accept epistemic facts. What it does not show, and what a realist might hope can be shown, is that if there are realistically-construed epistemic facts, then there are moral facts of the same level of robustness. That is what I hope to show here.

First, I argue that the epistemic standing of a belief depends on how diligent an inquirer the agent has been; this in turn depends on facts about the moral context of the agent’s situation. Hence moral and epistemic facts are intertwined. Some might reply that the intuitions that this argument relies upon are the product of a confusion between moral and epistemic forms of evaluation. However, we do not generally conflate moral and epistemic evaluations, so there is no good reason to think that this is happening here. Second, I argue that the epistemic status of an agent’s belief depends on what evidence the agent possesses when the assessment is being made. Although evidence possession is synchronic, ethical considerations are relevant to whether or not evidence is possessed by an agent at a time. So moral

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41 Forthcoming at the *Journal of Moral Philosophy* as “From Epistemic to Moral Realism.”
facts are entangled with epistemic facts. Further reasoning will show that moral facts must have the same level of robustness as the epistemic facts that they are entangled with.

1. The Epistemic Argument

Moral realism is generally understood to be the view that (a) statements like “murder is morally wrong” purport to describe the world, (b) some of these statements are non-trivially true in virtue of normative moral facts, and (c) these facts do not depend upon the attitudes of actual or idealized human agents. When definitions of moral realism diverge, it is usually over the formulation of (c), though something like it is needed to exclude cultural relativism and subjectivism. Some define moral realism as including epistemic criteria, such as the claim that most humans have some moral knowledge (e.g., Cuneo 2007, 32-6). For present purposes, I will understand moral realism to be the purely ontological thesis that there are moral facts which are not constructed by human beings. The term “epistemic realism” seems a natural label to apply to the view that there are mind-independent epistemic facts – e.g., that some beliefs are unjustified (Nobis 2005, 2-11). Now consider the following argument:

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42 For examples of philosophers who use definitions of moral realism similar to the one I use here, see Huemer (2005, 4-5), Brink (1989, 5-7), Shafer-Landau (2003, 2), and David Enoch (2013, 1-8, especially 3).
Epistemic Argument

1. If epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is true.

2. Epistemic realism is true.
C: Therefore, moral realism is true.

Nathan Nobis (2005), Terence Cuneo (2007) and Richard Rowland (2013) advance versions of this argument, which is potentially persuasive because epistemic realism seems harder to deny than moral realism. Perhaps the denial of epistemic facts altogether is even self-defeating, as I have tried to argue in chapter 2. Unfortunately, the main argument that Nobis and Cuneo provide to support the first premise, which Cuneo calls the “Parity Premise,” is not persuasive. Nobis, speaking of moral and epistemic judgments, writes that “an objection to understanding one kind of claim realistically is also a plausible, if not equally strong, objection to the other kind” (2005, 1-2). Similarly, Cuneo argues that if moral facts do not exist, then that must be because they would have to bear one or more of the “objectionable features” that anti-realists have identified (2007, 7-8). For example, they would have “queer” motivating powers (Mackie 1977, 38-42), would play no role in explaining our experiences (Harman 1977, 3-10), or would generate categorically normative prescriptions (Joyce 2001, 34-45; Olson 2014, 43). See Cuneo (2007, 117), David Copp (1995, 46–7), Bart Streumer (2013, 197), Joyce (2001, 49-50) and Stan Husi (2013, 429).

44 Cuneo’s statement of the Parity Premise differs slightly from mine: “If there are no moral facts, then there are no epistemic facts” (2007, 6). Rowland (2013) doesn’t offer an argument in favor of the Parity Premise but defends it against an objection by Chris Heathwood (2009).
chapter 6). Over the course of The Normative Web, Cuneo argues that if moral facts have these properties, then epistemic facts do as well.\textsuperscript{45}

When Cuneo writes that “If moral facts do not exist, that is presumably because they would display the objectionable features” (2007, 8), he seems to mean that the failure of these anti-realist arguments entitles us to conclude that moral facts exist. Why it would not be better to suspend judgment instead? By way of analogy, imagine arguing for God’s existence on the grounds that “If God does not exist, that is presumably because of the existence of evil” and then proceeding to give a theodicy. It would be strange to make the case for theism by relying on a premise that so clearly shifts the burden of proof onto the atheist. The Nobis-Cuneo defense of the Parity Premise seems to shift the burden onto the moral anti-realist in an analogous way.

Even if the best arguments against moral facts impugn epistemic facts, it does not follow that whoever accepts epistemic facts must accept moral facts. A skeptic could say that we have defeasible reasons for rejecting whatever entities bear the objectionable features. Epistemic facts have a strike against them, but perhaps we must posit them in order to avoid self-defeat. The same is not true of moral facts. This reply weakens the skeptic’s hand as it concedes that objectionable feature-bearing entities are possible. It also invites the response that overriding

\textsuperscript{45} Cuneo and I are operating with slightly different conceptions of “realism.” Cuneo defines moral realism in terms of loyalty to certain commonsense platitudes about morality. So the presumption in favor of common sense and the presumption in favor of realism go hand in hand for him. But I want to avoid relying on the claim that moral realism is the common sense view if I can – or else avoid relying on the claim that what is a matter of common sense is presumed to be true. I anticipate that many anti-realists, who I would like to persuade, will reject that claim.
considerations of a different kind favor moral facts. Nevertheless, one can accept
one kind of fact and not the other without being inconsistent. A more general
dilemma is this. Do we have better reasons for thinking that epistemic facts exist
than we have for thinking that moral facts exist? If the answer is no, then the moral
anti-realist has nothing to fear from embracing epistemic anti-realism. If the
answer is yes, then some interlocutor could reject moral facts for whatever reason
they are more suspect than epistemic facts.

Perhaps we should adopt a commonsense-friendly philosophical method and
treat all ordinary beliefs as innocent until proven guilty, so that a convincing
rebuttal to the anti-realist is all that the realist must provide. That may be right. I
am highly sympathetic to that approach. But an argument for the Parity Premise
that does not rely on a commitment to any particular philosophical method would
be superior. Realists might hope to find an argument for the Parity Premise that
could potentially convince interlocutors who are not willing to concede that moral
facts deserve the benefit of the doubt. In what follows, I present two arguments that
show that epistemic and moral facts are entangled in such a way that the existence
of certain epistemic facts entails the existence of moral facts. This places the Parity
Premise on firmer footing.

2. The Entanglement Argument

My first argument is as follows:
Entanglement Argument

1. If there are epistemic facts, then those beliefs that are arrived at through diligent inquiry are in some sense epistemically better than those arrived at through negligent inquiry.

2. In some cases, the fact that an investigation counts as diligent or negligent presupposes facts about the moral features of the agent's situation.

C: Therefore, if there are epistemic facts, then there are moral facts.  

Although I will focus on justification, the Entanglement Argument requires only that there be some dimension of epistemic assessment that is sensitive to moral considerations. I assume that doxastic states are the most basic subjects of epistemic evaluation, but that assumption is not critical, either. In Blameworthy Belief, Nikolaj Nottelmann writes that “In a strong sense, I submit, the branch of epistemology that I here engage investigates believers, not beliefs in themselves” (2006, 34). The idea that epistemology directly evaluates agents is congenial to the “virtue epistemology” views of Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2009), Linda Zagzebski (1996), and others. If that turns out to be right, then we need only modify 1 so that diligent inquiry improves the epistemic standing of agents rather than their doxastic states.

46 For simplification, I omitted two steps from the formalized argument: “Therefore, if there are facts about whether an inquiry counts as diligent or negligent, then there are moral facts” and “Therefore, if beliefs arrived at diligently are epistemically better than those arrived at negligently, then there are moral facts.”

47 See also Lorraine Code (1987, 1-14).
“Diligence” and “negligence” in 1 are deliberately not specified as being epistemic, moral, or generically practical evaluative terms. I am sympathetic with Clifford, who declined to distinguish between epistemic and moral senses of “ought” (1999), though I cannot collapse those two forms of evaluation at this stage without begging the question. The three things I must assume here are that (i) we can in some sense be diligent or negligent inquirers, (ii) what kind of inquirers we are is relevant to the epistemic standing of some of our doxastic states, and (iii) whether or not a decision not to seek additional information constitutes investigative negligence depends on the practical, and specifically moral, context in which the decision is being made. Readers who insist on classifying these evaluative terms may either choose to read “diligence” and “negligence” morally, in which case (2) is analytically true and 1 posits a point of ethical encroachment upon epistemic assessments, or they may read them as epistemic evaluations, in which case the opposite is true.

The idea that practical considerations encroach upon epistemic assessments, or “epistemic impurism,” has recently enjoyed significant support among philosophers (Kim 2017). David Owens (2000), Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath (2002, 2009), Jason Stanley (2005) and others defend impurism on the grounds that epistemic standards depend on what is practically at stake. Stanley writes that “factors that make belief into knowledge include elements from practical
rationality” hence “the distinction between practical and theoretical rationality is less clear than one might wish” (2005, 2). In a similar vein, Owens says that

When we assess how sensible a belief would be, we must ask ourselves whether there is sufficient evidence to justify that belief, and it is impossible to determine how much evidence should be required to convince us of the point without considering the importance of the issue, the cognitive resources available to resolve it, and so forth. (2000, 23)

I believe that the importance of the issue being investigated is significant because of how it reflects on the investigative diligence of the agent. If an issue is unimportant and inquiry is costly, then an inquirer hardly seems criticizable for declining to seek additional information. If the issue is crucial, then her unwillingness to dig deeper constitutes an investigative failure, and this failure plausibly compromises the epistemic standing of some of her doxastic states. A belief that is proportioned to the current evidence will be unjustified, or at least epistemically sub-par in some way, if the investigation that uncovered that evidence is inadequate in the circumstances.

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48 According to Stanley’s “Interest-Relative Invariantism” knowledge is semantically invariantist and epistemically impurist. This means that while “knowledge” consistently refers to the same cognitive state, practical considerations are relevant to whether an agent is in that state. This contrasts with Keith DeRose’s (2011, 2009) version of contextualism, according to which practical considerations determine which doxastic state the word “knowledge” refers to, but do not change the epistemic facts themselves.
Many philosophers accept something like this. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes that “Our obligations with respect to our believings do not pertain just to propositions that we happen to consider; often it’s our obligation to get new propositions in mind” (2010, 104). Hilary Kornblith writes, “When we ask whether an agent’s beliefs are justified we are asking whether he has done all he should to bring it about that he has true beliefs” (2014, 33). Bruce Reichenbach claims that “epistemic excellence” involves more than having important true beliefs and avoiding falsehoods; it also requires “engaging in appropriate truth-realizing practices” (2012, 43). Lara Buchak says that “since one can act on the world in service of epistemic or practical goals, looking for evidence seems to fall within the reaches of both epistemic and practical rationality” (2010, 108). Finally, Michael Huemer writes that “a belief might be unjustified, despite its seeming to be true, if the believer fails to exercise due caution in accepting it (fails to investigate the issue, to gather evidence)” (2001, 110). He imagines a man, creatively named Smith, who attends a lecture by a creationist and readily accepts the speaker’s conclusions without ever investigating the matter further:

...I would consider Smith’s belief insufficiently justified due to Smith’s failure to investigate the other side of the issue. In order to be justified in accepting creationism, he would also have to attend a lecture (or read a book, or some

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49 The context makes it clear that Wolterstorff doesn’t think these obligations are of radically different types.
such) by an advocate of the theory of evolution, to see whether they could make evolution seem reasonable. (*Ibid.*)

By “insufficiently justified” Huemer means insufficient to avoid epistemic blame. Suppose, to modify the case, that Smith attends an event where a creationist speaks, followed by a defender of Darwin’s theory. After hearing the first lecture, Smith thinks “I’m satisfied” and heads for the door, never to investigate the issue further. Grant that the creationist’s arguments are reasonable enough to provide some reason to think that creationism is true to someone who has had no other exposure to debates on the topic. Nevertheless, if Smith continues to believe that creationism is true on the basis of this evidence alone, then his belief is epistemically unjustified – or, if we follow Huemer and take epistemic justification to be scalar rather than bivalent, his belief is insufficiently justified.

Surely that is not because the belief is based on incomplete evidence, since that is true of all but the most basic logical and perceptual beliefs. Nor could the reason be that Smith knows that he lacks pertinent evidence. Recall another Smith, the man who is epistemically foiled in the Gettier case. This famous counter-example to the justified true belief account of knowledge requires that Smith be justified in believing that he will get the job that goes to his rival (Gettier 1963). Smith presumably knows that he does not know how well his rival interviewed, and he knows that this information is relevant to his prospects of getting the job. And yet we have no trouble accepting that Smith’s belief that he will get the job could be
justified in a case like this. So epistemic justification does not necessarily require having access to all of the pertinent evidence known to exist when the available evidence seems compelling.

Whereas Gettier’s Smith has a justified belief, Huemer’s Smith has a paradigmatically unjustified belief. Both men proportion their beliefs to the evidence they have, and both know that they lack pertinent evidence. Huemer suggests that Smith the creationist has evidential grounds for doubting creationism because he knows that he has not investigated both sides; presumably, he knows that investigating only one side of a disputed issue is an unreliable method of belief formation. (2001, 111). But something similar could be said for Gettier’s Smith: he knows that the job is competitive and that he does not know his rival’s qualifications. We can stipulate that the probability of creationism’s being true given only the evidence presented in the creationist’s lecture, sans rebuttal, matches the probability that Smith gets the job given only the evidence of his own interview, sans knowledge of his rival. We cannot expect that either man must eliminate all grounds for doubt in order to be justified because that standard makes it nearly impossible to be justified about anything. So what accounts for the difference in the epistemic standings of their beliefs?

The answer, I submit, is that only the Smith the creationist is plausibly characterized as a negligent inquirer. We do not expect the Smith of the Gettier case to snoop around to see how well his rival performed before concluding that the man who will get the job will have ten coins in his pocket. His mistake is in some
sense an honest mistake; the same cannot be said for the partisan who eschews disconfirming evidence or the person who cannot be bothered to investigate properly before forming an opinion. Either profile could fit Smith the creationist, and either would be grounds for evaluating his belief more harshly. As Jason Baehr writes: “What is especially epistemically good or worthy about believing in accordance with a defective or contaminated evidence base, particularly when the defects in question are attributable to one’s own cognitive defects? It would not seem much” (2011, 74).

So 1, the claim that the quality of an inquiry affects the epistemic standing of beliefs, seems true.

I turn my attention to 2, the claim that moral considerations are relevant to whether an agent is a diligent or negligent inquirer. This premise gains support from the thought that we do not in all circumstances need to acquire all the information that we possibly could acquire in order to avoid being negligent investigators.\(^5\) Consider a medical researcher who can learn something of interest only by performing gruesome, involuntary experiments on prisoners of war. If he refrains from doing this on moral grounds, I think we would not say that he chose to be an ethical person at the cost of being a negligent inquirer. We would rather say that his refusal to seek new information in these circumstances does not render him a negligent investigator. As Wolterstorff says, “which deficiencies in a person’s system of beliefs that a person is obligated to (try to) remove or forestall are very

\(^5\) Though a few defend extremely demanding intellectual obligations, e.g., Roderick Chisholm (1977, 14), Richard J. Hall and Charles R. Johnson (1998, 133).
much a matter of where that person is situated in the space of moral obligation” (2010, 105). So 2 is also true.

Returning to Smith the creationist: suppose that he leaves after the first lecture only because he receives a message informing him that his child has been injured and he is urgently needed at the hospital. As before, Smith continues to accept creationism on the basis of the evidence he has, which at this point supports creationism, until he has a chance to watch the rebuttal on the internet a few weeks later. At that point, Smith is surprised to find that the case for evolution is stronger than he realized and, after mulling the matter over for a while, changes his mind. Consider the epistemic standing of Smith’s belief in creationism before he has the opportunity to hear the other side. Plausibly this belief deserves a better epistemic appraisal than it would have had he no good reasons to forgo, or postpone, further investigation.

According to Nottelmann, an agent’s belief is epistemically blameworthy whenever that belief is epistemically undesirable – essentially, false or unreasonable – and the agent has no appropriate excuse (2006, 47-51). The Entanglement Argument makes no reference to a specifically epistemic form of blameworthiness, and I do not think that it requires it. Nonetheless, Nottelmann’s conceptual framework is compatible with the Entanglement Argument. In his terms, Smith’s belief in creationism may be epistemically undesirable, but his moral obligation to be at the hospital affords him with an appropriate excuse for having an epistemically undesirable belief. Rik Peels examines two kinds of excuses for
violations of intellectual obligations: ignorance and force (2017, 132-147). If Smith had no idea that there was any other perspective to be sought out, or if a tyrannical government made a fair investigation impossible by burning every last copy of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, then we would surely not fault Smith for failing to investigate appropriately.

Nor, I think, would we label Smith a negligent investigator for declining to undertake an investigation that is extremely costly. Suppose that any inquiry into evolution would trigger horrific reprisals from the anti-evolution regime. In that case, we should either say that Smith has a legitimate excuse for failing to investigate, or that he needs no excuse because he is under no obligation to investigate in these circumstances. Either way, we would not judge him to be a negligent investigator, and this is relevant to the epistemic standing of his doxastic states. So if there is practical encroachment upon epistemic assessments, as seems plausible, then facts about the moral obligations we have are relevant to some epistemic assessments.

3. Can Impurist Intuitions be Debunked?

Epistemic purism is the idea that epistemic assessments are determined entirely by factors that increase or decrease the probability of a belief’s being true from the point of view of the agent (Kim 2017, 1-2). Purist views include Bayesian epistemology, the view that an agent’s beliefs should be updated in way that is informed by Bayes’s Theorem (Bovens and Hartmann 2004), reliablist, the view
that beliefs should be formed through reliable processes or by reliable faculties (Sosa 1991, 2015; Goldman 1979), and evidentialism, the view that an agent’s degree of epistemic support for any proposition ought the correspond to the degree it is supported by the evidence at the time of the assessment (Dougherty 2014; Conee and Feldman 2009).51

Purists often reject what William Alston called the “deontological conception” of epistemic justification (1989, 115-8), according to which epistemic norms are conceptually linked with permissibility, duty, responsibility, merit, reproach and praise. They prefer a non-deontological conception. On this view, to say that an agent is epistemically justified in believing something is simply to say that his believing it would be consistent with the norms of the epistemic domain.52 Jonathan Adler writes that “the objective version of evidentialism for full belief” is unconcerned with rationality and wisdom; rather one’s “believing that \( p \) is proper (i.e., in accord with the concept of belief) if and only if one’s evidence [objectively] establishes that \( p \) is true” (2002, 51). Trent Dougherty likewise writes that the

51 Kim (2017, 2-3) classifies contextualism of the kind defended by DeRose (2011, 2009), according to which the meaning of the word “knowledge” is affected by practical factors, to be a form of impurism. But my interest here is in metaphysical impurism – how moral facts affect epistemic facts – not semantics.

52 I say “often” because I think that it’s possible for an evidentialist to accept the deontological conception. We can distinguish between evaluative evidentialism which simply says that a belief is good to the degree it matches the evidence, and normative evidentialism which says that there is a duty upon the agent to bring his credal state into harmony with his evidence. Stapleford entertains, and seems to endorse, this version of evidentialism (2013, 4069-37; 2015, 84-5). If there is a positive epistemic duty for me to bring my beliefs into accord with my evidence, then this duty is plausibly subject to certain pragmatic constraints rather than being absolute and unyielding.
epistemic ought “is synchronic and does not imply can and so bears no logical relation to inquiry” (2014, 154-50).\(^{53}\)

Purists can be expected to resist the conclusions I have drawn in the previous section on the grounds that I rely on an objectionably moralized conception of epistemic justification. Sosa, who endorses a version of impurism (2015, 172-3), nonetheless observes that there is an “attractive alternative” to the impurist interpretation of “high stakes” cases discussed in the previous section:

What is affected instead by rising stakes, we might counter, is how we are willing to choose on a given basis. Thus, we might feel confident enough to judge and even to affirm publicly that the ice is solid enough to bear our weight, while still being hesitant to step on it, if the water is too cold and we fear for our lives or even just for our comfort. On this view, we are still willing to think, and even to say, that the ice is solid enough, while considering this too uncertain to justify relevant action. What is more, our judgment might even constitute ordinary, commonsense knowledge, even though this knowledge is not relevantly “actionable.” (2015, 184)

Sosa’s point is that we can insulate our epistemic evaluations from judgments about certain kinds of actions. Epistemic assessments are not affected by high

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\(^{53}\) Evidentialism could be understood in a way that is consistent with the idea that epistemic “ought” implies can. Perhaps an agent’s inability to adjust his beliefs appropriately upon receiving new information entails that this information cannot constitute evidence for him.
stakes, but our intuitions about them might be due to a subtle conflation with ethical evaluations. A similar story could be told about cases of investigative negligence of the kind that I’ve used to motivate impurism. At the outset of “The Ethics of Belief,” Clifford imagines a ship owner who does not want to spend money refitting his ship. He manages to convince himself of his vessel’s seaworthiness by diverting his mind from contrary evidence and refusing to inquire. We know this is going to end badly. The ship owner “watched her departure with a light heart ... and he got his insurance-money when she went down in midocean and told no tales” (1999, 70). Commenting on this passage, Dougherty writes, “Since [Clifford’s ship-owner] owed a duty to the passengers to protect their safety, his lack of investigation is straightforwardly wrong, morally wrong... there is nothing distinctively epistemic going on here” (2011, 153).

Dougherty is more interested in showing that there is no distinctively epistemic form of responsibility – a conclusion that I can accept – than in showing that moral facts cannot be relevant to epistemic facts. But his point can be taken as a rebuke to impurists generally: because the ship owner’s behavior is “straightforwardly wrong, morally wrong” there is no need to attribute any epistemic shortcoming to him in order to account for our negative response. Dougherty believes that we should not posit any ethical encroachment into the epistemic domain without good reason because this would complicate both our
moral and our epistemic theories.\textsuperscript{54} We don’t have a good reason for positing this encroachment if we can explain away impurist intuitions.

In defense of the impurists, I think that it is telling that we do not generally confuse moral and epistemic evaluations. We have no trouble evaluating Eichmann’s belief that the trains will arrive at Auschwitz on time, or the terrorist’s belief that the bomb will explode when he presses the detonator, as being epistemically justified provided that each has done the necessary legwork. The intuitions that I am trying to elicit arise only when Eichmann and the terrorist fail as investigators. Such failures are far from being the most alarming moral failures that these agents exhibit, to put it mildly. Likewise, we are not tempted to say that any beliefs acquired from an investigation that is foolish or morally unjustified to undertake must be epistemically unjustified. If Smith ignores the message summoning him to the hospital to hear the pro-evolution lecture, then he does something morally wrong, but he might still learn something. It is unlikely that our epistemic intuitions are corrupted by our moral judgments only in the narrow range of cases that lend intuitive support to impurism.

Perhaps the purist will say that we should be skeptical of impurist intuitions because we have powerful independent reasons to support purism and a thinner conception of epistemic justification. The only way to refute this response would be

\textsuperscript{54} Dougherty writes that once “one goes beyond actual evidence and suggests that one epistemically ought to believe on the basis of possible evidence, one will have very hard time indeed drawing a nonarbitrary line” (2014, 158). He’s right about that – it is very hard, on my view, to know how much effort one must invest in uncovering new information in order to be epistemically justified, and it will vary with context. But that is not an objection to my view; that is life.
to refute all of the arguments that have been given in favor of every kind of purism, which is beyond the scope of my project here. Instead I will focus on a particular kind of purism, evidentialism, that is often thought to be especially compelling.

Scott Stapleford says that our intellectual obligation to base our beliefs on our evidence “feels almost—but not quite—like a conceptual truth” and that it is “even more obvious than the clearest moral imperatives, such as the duty to help those in need” (2013, 4065). Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, two prominent defenders of evidentialism, say that they wrote their first article in defense of evidentialism when “we noticed to our amazement that prominent epistemologists were defending views that seem contrary to evidentialism....” They “remain mildly amazed” at the persistence of disagreement (2011, 1).

Is evidentialism really so compelling? Conee and Feldman define evidentialism “in its fundamental form” as “a supervenience thesis according to which facts about whether or not a person is justified in believing a proposition supervene on facts describing the evidence that the person has” at a time (2011, 1). Surely that is not obvious. What seems compelling is the weaker claim that believing in accordance with one’s present evidence is a necessary condition for justified belief. Only the claim that belief-evidence correspondence is sufficient for epistemic justification is in conflict with the Entanglement Argument, and we have seen that this claim is contested. I believe that similar things could be said about other forms of purism: on examination, they turn out to be less intuitive than they
initially appear, and their most intuitive features are consistent with the kind of impurism presupposed by the Entanglement Argument.

Moreover, if evidentialism is understood in a restricted way, as Conee and Feldman have proposed, then it is compatible with the conclusion of the Entanglement Argument, after all. Kornblith, proposing a counter-example to evidentialism, asks us to imagine that Alfred justifiably believes ‘p’ and ‘if p, then q’. Alfred believes ‘q’, but not because ‘q’ is validly derivable from other things that he believes. Alfred distrusts modus ponens arguments and believes ‘q’ only because he likes the sound of a sentence that expresses it (2014, 21-22; for a similar case, see DeRose 2011, 138). Evidentialism gives Alfred a clean bill of health because his conclusion fully corresponds with his evidence, albeit accidentally. Conee and Feldman offer a conciliatory response. Evidentialism, they say, is only a theory of propositional justification (i.e., belief-evidence correspondence). There is, however, also well-foundedness, which evaluates the extent to which she uses the evidence she has to form the doxastic attitude in question. Alfred’s belief is propositionally justified but not well-founded and this explains our intuition that something is epistemically amiss (2011, 93).

Making evidentialism a theory of propositional justification, not all epistemic assessments, weakens evidentialism significantly. If evidentialism is silent on all other epistemic assessments, then these may be sensitive to practical and moral context, per evidentialism. The Entanglement Argument does not specify that

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55 Dougherty (2011, 155-6) uses this same reply to counter DeRose’s (2011, 138) example, which is similar to Kornblith’s. He uses the term “doxastic justification” to mean well-foundedness.
epistemic justification is entangled with moral considerations, only that some
dimension of epistemic assessment is. I have assumed that this dimension is
epistemic justification, but again that assumption is not critical. Indeed, it is
plausible that ethical considerations encroach upon well-foundedness. After all, the
degree to which an agent has reflected diligently on the evidence she has seems
important to determining extent to which an agent uses the evidence she has to
form the doxastic attitude in question. If Conee and Feldman are right, then the
best evidentialist response to Kornblith’s proposed counter-example is to modify
evidentialism in such a way that it is compatible with my thesis.

Although I am under no illusion that this settles the longstanding dispute
between epistemic purists and impurists, I hope that I have shown that the
impurist has ample resources for resisting purist attempts to debunk intuitions
congenial to impurism.

4. The Evidence Possession Argument

I now turn to my second argument for epistemic-moral entanglement, which is as
follows:
Evidence Possession Argument

1. If there are epistemic facts, then there are facts about whether particular agents possess or lack evidence at a time.

2. If there are facts about whether particular agents possess or lack evidence at a time, then there are moral facts.

C: Therefore, if there are epistemic facts, then there are moral facts.

Unlike the Entanglement Argument, the Evidence Possession Argument does not rely on the assumption that information an agent could have acquired, but did not due to investigative negligence, is relevant to the epistemic status of her current beliefs. 1 is intuitive enough: if there are epistemic facts, then they must include truthmakers for statements like: “The jury’s decision, although mistaken, was rational because it was based on the evidence that the jury members possessed at the time.” 2 is more contentious, and so my aim here will be to motivate it. Evidence possession is synchronic in the sense that an agent can have some evidence, and lack other evidence she could acquire, within an arbitrarily small time slice. That does not mean that evidence possession has no diachronic implications, however. For an agent to have evidence, it must be possible for her to integrate it into her thinking and decision making, activities that take time to carry out. This leaves the door ajar for ethical encroachment.

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56 I will use the term “possessing” evidence synonymously with “having” evidence and “having available” evidence.
To see how, suppose for the sake of argument that some physical objects constitute evidence. To have evidence of this kind would be to have it within grasp, almost literally. The members of a jury may be said to have a murder weapon as evidence if they can request to see a piece of evidence that is inside a labeled bag in a nearby room, for example. They cannot be said to have the same object as evidence if they know it exists, but cannot retrieve it or examine it in ways that will be helpful to their purpose. Nor do I think can they be said to have it if they can only retrieve and examine it by paying an unacceptable cost. Suppose that the only way to physically bring the murder weapon in front of them and examine it is to take Smith’s family hostage and make him retrieve it for them. Plausibly, that is a reason for thinking that they do not actually have the murder weapon as evidence since it can be retrieved only at an ethically unacceptable cost.

So if a physical object can constitute evidence, as ordinary language suggests, then prudential and ethical features of a situation are relevant to whether or not one possesses some physical object as evidence at a time. Some philosophers deny that physical objects ever constitute evidence in the epistemically relevant sense. According to mentalism, “a person’s beliefs are justified only by things that are internal to the person’s mental life” (Conce and Feldman 2011, 55). On this view,

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57 Mentalism canvases a wide variety of views. For David Lewis “perceptual experiences and apparent memories” constitute the evidence that I have (1996, 424). Donald Davidson likewise says that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (2001, 141). Quine identifies “all the evidence that agent has to go on” with the “stimulation of his sense receptors” (1969, 75). Timothy Williamson (1997, 717-742) defends the view that all of the propositions that an agent knows constitute her evidence. Ram Neta’s view (2008) is similar to Williamson’s. Neta agrees with Williamson that only propositions can be evidence. He adds that for an agent to have propositions as evidence she must be able to use those propositions to rationally regulate her attitudes. Moreover, rationality must require that she “distribute her confidence over hypotheses in
the jury has the relevant evidence only when the physical objects classified as legally as evidence cause them to have evidence-constituting mental states. Does mentalism provide a plausible route for resisting 2?

I believe that it does not. Consider the question of which evidence-constituting mental states count as evidence that an agent has at a time. The broadest possible answer is what Feldman calls the “total view,” according to which all of the evidence-constituting mental states in a person’s mind are the evidence she has. Feldman recognizes that this view is subject to compelling counterexamples. If I have a memory that can only be recovered through a specific set of triggers of which I am unaware, then it seems that I do not have this memory as evidence. According to the total view, however, I do have this memory as evidence (2011, 228). Feldman rejects the total view because it has that counterintuitive implication. After considering a number of intermediate views and finding them all unsatisfactory – for good reasons, I believe – he arrives at the opposite extreme. On Feldman’s view an agent has a mental state available as evidence if and only if she is currently thinking about it (2011, 232).

Why does Feldman define “having evidence” so narrowly? Why not allow that thoughts which could be brought before the mind with minimal effort might be currently available evidence? The answer is that Feldman believes he cannot do that without compromising the independence of practical matters and the epistemic assessments of beliefs, i.e., without endorsing impurism. He asks us to consider a proportion to the degree to which those hypotheses are supported by the conjunction” of all the propositions that constitute her evidence (2008, 12).
pair of cases. In the first, he accepts a friend's word about the difficulty of the hike to Precarious Peak (he says it's a breeze), failing to recall that his friend is a notorious liar and prankster. In the second case, he fails to look up information about that hike in a guidebook on hand. Feldman writes: “In each case I could have ‘looked it up’ but didn’t. Perhaps my failure to do so constitutes methodological irrationality in each case, but it doesn’t show current-state irrationality in either case” because my beliefs are in both cases based on the evidence that I currently have (2011, 234).

According to Feldman, beliefs can be said to be methodologically rational “if and only if they are formed as a result of good epistemic methods.” Current-state rationality “concerns whether believing a particular proposition is rational for a person at a time given exactly the situation the person happens to be in at the time” (2011, 228). Feldman believes that only current-state rationality is “properly epistemic” because methodological rationality is entangled with practical matters (2011, 235-6). This is demonstrated by the apparent parity of internal and external acts of investigation in his Precarious Peak examples. The upshot of treating methodological rationality as not being genuinely epistemic is that neither external nor internal acts of investigation, such as memory searching or reflection, can be relevant to the epistemic assessments of an agent’s beliefs.

It is implausible, however, that whether or not a belief was formed in accordance with the best epistemic methods has no implications for the epistemic standing of that belief on any dimension of epistemic evaluation. Indeed if epistemic
assessments were entirely synchronic, then it would be hard to see how there could be such a thing as an epistemic method at all, since any method takes time to implement. Pace Feldman, methodological rationality seems to be both practically entangled and genuinely epistemic. Feldman’s narrow version of mentalism, moreover, seems no less susceptible to counter-example than the total view that he rejects. A superficially appealing, hastily-formed belief, recognizable as incorrect within a moment’s reflection, could count as justified on this view so long as the agent is not thinking of the reasons for rejecting it (even if it is clear that he should be thinking about those reasons). Feldman’s view also rules out the intuitive possibility that you can fail to think of the evidence you have.

Feldman attempts to escape, or at least mitigate, the counterintuitive implications of his position by exploiting the ambiguities inherent in the words “currently thinking about.” He distinguishes between occasional and dispositional knowledge and claims that “currently thinking about” something is consistent with thinking about it dispositionally as well as occasionally. Feldman says that “a person knows a thing dispositionally provided that the person would know it occasionally if he thought of it” (2011, 236). This rough characterization of dispositional belief allows Feldman to say that you can be justified in believing that Washington D.C. is the capital of the United States when you are not consciously reflecting upon that fact because you are currently dispositionally thinking about it.

There are at least two problems with this proposal. First, thinking of certain things might prompt spontaneous insight, as when I immediately assent to a
proposition never previously considered. Feldman seems committed to saying that such an epiphany counts as evidence possessed all along, which is absurd. Second, to say that I would know something if I thought of it could mean either that I would know it immediately upon thinking of it, or that I would know it after a period of sustained and attentive reflection. If we take Feldman to mean the former, then boundary between possessed and unpossessed evidence appears fuzzy. The number of seconds that I need to spend thinking about a proposition before assenting to it might determine whether or not I have some mental state as evidence. If thinking of something could mean giving it sustained mental attention, then it is unclear how Feldman’s version of mentalism is substantively different from the total view that he rejects, since even deeply submerged mental states could be uncovered with enough sustained attention.

Feldman embraces a narrow notion of evidence possession because he recognizes that a more expansive view opens the door to pragmatic encroachment into evidence possession. A narrow view of evidence possession has unpalatable consequences, however, and Feldman’s strategy for avoiding these consequences is unpromising. I run Feldman’s reasoning the other way: because we cannot accept an extremely narrow view of evidence possession, we must accept pragmatic (and, I believe, ultimately ethical) encroachment into evidence possession.\footnote{Feldman could avoid some of the counter-intuitive implications of his view of evidence possession by allowing that unpossessed evidence can affect the epistemic statuses of beliefs. If that were the case, then there would be no basis for saying that ethical considerations encroach upon evidence possession, and the Evidence Possession Argument would be doomed. However, as Feldman himself points out pragmatic factors would then be relevant to which unpossessed evidence is relevant to justification. So we’d have epistemic-moral entanglement elsewhere. I’d like to thank an anonymous referee for making this observation.} Because
epistemic facts depend on facts about evidence possession, epistemic facts are entangled with moral facts.

5. What Sort of Moral Facts?

Both the Entanglement Argument and the Evidence Possession Argument purport to establish that if there are epistemic facts, then there are ethical facts of some sort. But recall that the Parity Premise of the Epistemic Argument is “If epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is true.” This goes beyond what has been established so far. The claim “Smith has an obligation to pay Jones fifty dollars” presupposes certain facts about currency, but we cannot infer from this that if we are moral realists, then we should be realists about currency, too. What reason, then, do we have for thinking that the moral facts entangled with realistically-construed epistemic facts must themselves be realistically construed? To complete the case for the Parity Premise, I offer the following argument:

Robustness Argument

1. If moral facts are less robustly real than epistemic facts they are entangled with, then these epistemic facts will be hostage to desire.\(^{59}\)

2. Epistemic facts are not hostage to desire.

C: Therefore, entangled moral facts are not less robustly real then the epistemic facts that they are entangled with.

\(^{59}\) Recall that I take moral realism to be the purely ontological thesis that there are robust moral facts. So skepticism about what the moral facts are is compatible with the kind of realism that I defend here. Expressivism and other non-cognitivist views, according to which moral statements lack propositional content, are relevant only inasmuch as they obviate the need to posit moral facts.
Let us return to Smith the creationist. Suppose, as you might have already suspected, that Smith has a strong desire not to investigate human origins for fear of what the inquiry might reveal, and that he breaks off his investigation for this reason. If a crude version of ethical subjectivism is true, and if moral and epistemic facts are intertwined in the way that I have argued that they are, then Smith’s desire not to believe evolution would mean he has a moral obligation not to look into the matter. I have argued that an agent’s refusal to violate moral principles in order to undertake an investigation does not render her a negligent investigator. If that is right, then Smith would not count as a negligent investigator if he refuses to investigate for this reason. His belief in creationism could continue to be justified – an unacceptable result, surely. An agent’s belief cannot be epistemically justified simply because he desires to believe it. That would license all manner of self-deception. Hence, epistemic facts cannot be hostage to desire as they would be if ethical subjectivism were true.

What about other forms of anti-realism? The situation would be no better if epistemic facts were hostage to the collective desires of some society, as would be the case if cultural relativism turned out to be the true moral theory. The same I think would be true if fictionalism or non-cognitivism were true: realistically-construed epistemic facts would end up depending on a fiction, or expressions of subjective emotion. The dependency on subjective attitudes is no less present in
idealized response-dependent ethical theories. Matthew Kramer notes that if human beings were less compassionate, then the idealized versions of human beings would also be less compassionate (2009, 59-60). Indeed, their perfect consistency would likely make them more malign than most individuals in the real world. Were this the case, then it would follow that we would have good reasons not to undertake investigations that risk turning up information repugnant to that set of values. So on this anti-realist view, too, epistemic facts would end up hostage to contingent facts about human pro-attitudes.

One exception to this line of reasoning is moral error theory, or nihilism, the view that no non-trivial moral statements are true. On this view, realistically-construed epistemic facts would not be dependent upon individually or socially constructed moral facts, because there would be no such facts. So it seems that we are in need of a different argument against nihilism. If the Entanglement Argument is persuasive, then nihilism could be ruled out on the grounds that it generates implausible results in epistemology. That is, it would generate the result that there is no epistemic difference in Smith’s belief in the emergency case and in the case in which he has no good reason not to continue inquiring, since there are no moral facts to make the cases different. I think that is implausible, but the thoroughgoing moral error theorist must already be willing to bite far worse bullets than this (e.g., the trans-Atlantic slave trade was not morally wrong). So it is not clear that this *reductio ad absurdum* makes matters substantially worse for the nihilist.

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60 Cuneo allows that some forms of constructivism are compatible with realism, see *The Normative Web*, chapter 1.
To conclude, I have argued that epistemic and moral considerations are intertwined in such a way that it does not make sense to be realists about the former and not the latter. I have also argued that, given this entanglement, the truth of most forms of moral anti-realism would make epistemic facts dependent upon subjective mental states in unacceptable ways. I what I have argued is correct, then we have good reason to accept the Parity Premise: If epistemic realism is true, then moral realism is true. Thus the moral anti-realist can reject moral realism only by rejecting epistemic realism along with it. I think we should be realists about both domains.
Chapter 5: Against Normative Pluralism

Normative Pluralism is the view that practical reason consists in an irreducible plurality of normative domains, that these domains sometimes issue conflicting recommendations, and that, when this happens, there is never any one thing that one ought simpliciter to do. Suppose that self-interest and morality are two normative domains. It might then be true that reporting an unethical boss to the authorities would be morally recommended, but that not reporting him to avoid reprisals would be self-interestedly recommended. Knowing this much, you might think that you do not know the most important normative fact: what you just plain ought to do. If normative pluralism is true, then there would remain no further normative fact of this kind to be uncovered. Morally you should do one thing; self-interestedly you should do another – there things bottom out.

Here I argue against this view. All versions of normative pluralism can be classified as being either unrestricted or restricted. Unrestricted pluralism maintains that all coherent standards are reason-generating normative domains whereas restricted pluralism maintains that only some are. We shall see that unrestricted pluralism, depending on how it is cashed out, is either nihilism about practical reason or else it is subjectivism. Neither view is consistent with normative pluralism; hence, pluralism must be restricted. Restricted pluralism, however, faces two problems. The first stems from the question: “Why is it that some standards are normative domains while others are not?” The question seems to demand an

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61 This chapter was published as “Normative Pluralism Worthy of the Name is False” in the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 11 (2016).
answer, but it is hard to give any answer without appealing to considerations that imply facts about what we ought simpliciter to do. Second, restricted pluralism leads to absurdity in a trilemma that I will describe. So we have good reason to think restricted pluralism is false, too.

Since my concern here is presenting and defending my argument against pluralism, I will not respond to the arguments that have already been given in its favor.62

1. What Is Normative Pluralism?

A number of philosophers, including David Copp (1998, 2007, 2009), Michael Smith (1994, 95), Evan Tiffany (2007), Matthias Sagdahl (2014) and Derek Baker (forthcoming), have recently defended versions of what I am calling “normative pluralism.” Here are a few presentations of this view. Copp, in his seminal paper, “The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason,” writes that:

I will be defending the position that neither morality nor self-interest overrides the other, that there simply are verdicts and reasons of these different kinds, and that there is never an overall verdict as to which action is required simpliciter in situations where moral reasons and reasons of self-interest conflict. ... In my view, there is no standpoint that can claim

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62 Probably the most cited and influential argument for pluralism is presented by Copp (1997). See McLeod (2001) and Dorsey (2013) for responses. Ruth Chang provides an overview of the influential argument from notable-nominal comparisons against pluralism, which I will not discuss here, in (1997, 1-34).
normative priority over all other normative standpoints and render a
definitive verdict on the relative significance of moral and self-interested
reasons. That is, in cases of conflict between kinds of reasons, there is no fact
as to what a person ought *simpliciter* to do (1997, 86-87).

Likewise, Tiffany writes:

It is a feature of the view I call *deflationary normative pluralism* that, strictly
speaking, any proposition of the form “A has a reason to φ in C” expresses an
incomplete thought insofar as it fails to specify the type of reason in question.
Thus we can only ask, e.g., “Is there really a moral reason why I should act
morally?” or “Is there really a self-interested reason why I should act
morally?” If right, then both the authority and the supremacy questions are
illegitimate because neither can be formulated in a way that does not employ
the problematic concept of an unqualified reason (2007, 33).

Sagdahl defends that view that:

practical normativity is not a unified domain, but that it rather consists of
several incommensurable domains, such as morality and prudence. With this
idea in mind, we can think that there are *moral* reasons and *prudential*
reasons, but that there are no *plain* reasons (no reasons *simpliciter*).
Similarly, we can think that while there are things one morally ought to do, and things that one prudentially ought to do, there are no things we just plain ought to do. We can call an idea like this normative pluralism (2014, 405).

There are important differences between these thinkers, some of which we will discuss in due time. Nonetheless, each assents to the following three claims, the conjunction of which is normative pluralism:

1. **Source pluralism**: There exists an irreducible plurality of normative domains, which issue oughts of distinct kinds.\(^{63}\)

2. **Conflict**: It is possible for two or more of these domains to issue conflicting recommendations on what to do (i.e., “X-ly one ought to φ, Y-ly one ought not to φ,” where X and Y are two normative domains).\(^{64}\)

\(^{63}\) Note that irreducibility does not by itself imply incommensurability. A source pluralist may think that moral obligations normatively override self-interest, as Sarah Stroud does (1998), or that strong reasons of self-interest can override moral reasons, a view endorsed by Michael Slote (1983, 119-21) and Philippa Foot (2002, 181-88).

\(^{64}\) One way would be to hold that two domains are in conflict if and only if they issue incompatible requirements or obligations. According to scalar consequentialism, a view championed by Alastair Norcross (2006), morality issues no requirements, but only reasons of varying strengths depending upon the consequences they produce. One could construct counterpart scalar views of almost any other normative domain. It seems to make sense to say that two scalar normative domains, X and Y, conflict when one X-ly has good reason to φ, but Y-ly one has good reason not to φ. I will speak of a domain’s “recommending,” rather than “requiring,” an action in order to canvas this possibility.
3. **No authoritative adjudication:** There is no “all things considered” domain capable of issuing recommendations about what one ought *simpliciter* to do; hence, no authority exists that is capable of adjudicating disputes between normative domains.

To say that one ought *simpliciter* to do something is not to say that one ought to do something *according-to-yet-another-norm*, to borrow an expression from Stan Husi (2013, 424). It is to say that one ought from a stance that is comprehensive, giving due weight to all reasons issued by the subordinate domains, whose recommendations are authoritative and unrivaled, and so normative in the most robust sense. Copp has called this overarching normative domain “Reason” (with a capital “R”) and “Reason-as-such” (1997, 94). Although I find none of the many proposed labels completely satisfactory, I will follow Owen McLeod in calling it the “all things considered” domain, which best captures its comprehensiveness and is suggestive of its authority (2001, 269-81).

Many add a fourth claim. Copp’s concludes that “the idea of a standard of Reason-as-such is incoherent” (1997, 103). Tiffany, as we have seen, writes that “any proposition of the form “A has a reason to φ in C” expresses an incomplete thought insofar as it fails to specify the type of reason in question” (2007, 233). In

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65 The primary drawback to this label is ambiguity. “All things” can be considered in the light of a variety of concerns, e.g., morally, or prudentially. By all things considered, I mean all reasons given their due normative weight *simpliciter*.

66 See n. 63 (page 122) for a brief discussion of the difference between structural and substantive/permissive pluralism.
the same passage, he calls the concept of an unqualified reason “problematic.”

Dorsey, who rejects pluralism, notes that one form of it “is a product of the fact that we cannot make sense of an all-things-considered standpoint” (2013, 16). So many, and perhaps most, pluralists accept the following:

4. *Semantic pluralism*: Not only is there no “all things considered” domain to adjudicate disputes between first-order normative domains, but the very concept or idea of a domain that can issue verdicts that we ought *simpliciter* to follow is incoherent or confused.

If semantic pluralism is true, then normative pluralism is true. One can, however, accept normative pluralism without accepting semantic pluralism, just as one can be an atheist without thinking the idea of God is incoherent. Similarly, just as a proof of God’s existence would refute the notion that the concept of God is incoherent, a refutation of normative pluralism would ipso facto refute semantic pluralism. If we can establish that there is an all-things-considered domain, whose verdicts tell us what we ought *simpliciter* to do, then the idea of that domain, and ought *simpliciter*, must be coherent. Because I am arguing for exactly that, I will say no more about semantic pluralism.
2. Unrestricted Pluralism

Pluralism is unrestricted if all coherent standards are normative domains. Pluralism is restricted just in case at least some coherent standards fail to constitute normative domains in virtue of their content. Here I claim that reasons are inherently comparative. In order for something to be a reason, it must be the case that it is possible for it to make a difference to our normative situation relative to the other options in at least some instances. If that is right, then any metaethical view that counts every coherent standard as a normative domain is ultimately inconsistent with source pluralism and so cannot be a form of normative pluralism. It follows that normative pluralism must be restricted.

To be coherent, a standard must be logically consistent and satisfy a few other formal criteria. A coherent standard cannot demand the impossible, nor can it be tailored to specific actions or individuals (e.g., the standard of “Fred walking his dog in Central Park on Saturday, October 15, 2016”). For the unrestricted pluralist, all coherent standards, however ridiculous or repugnant, are normative domains. Although unrestricted pluralism is not a common view, it appears to be held by Tiffany and a few other philosophers. For Tiffany, something is a normative domain (or a “reason-generating standpoint,” in Tiffany’s terminology) if and only if:

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67 Derek Baker is developing a similar view, but his work is still in manuscript form. Husi, although he describes his view as “meta-normative reasons skepticism” also seems to endorse unrestricted pluralism (2013). In private conversations I have also heard this view endorsed by several philosophers, generally with naturalistic tendencies, who have not published on the topic.
There is some well-defined aim (e.g., intrinsic-desire-satisfaction), institutional framework (e.g., positive law), or standard of value (e.g., aesthetic value) relative to which considerations may be judged as standing in some normative relation to action (e.g., favouring, defeating, enabling) (2007, 255).

Tiffany does not specify what he means by a “well-defined aim” or what it means for there to be “some standard of value,” but his willingness to consider reason-giving standpoints such as an “absurdism standpoint,” (2007, 248) as well as domains of “anarchy” and “rudeness” (2007, 258-59), makes it clear that he intends both to be very wide in scope. He never provides an example of a standard that fails to be a normative domain in virtue of its content. The way he contrasts his own “deflationary normative pluralism” with Copp’s “grounded” pluralism, about which more in due time, further supports the interpretation that he is what I am calling an “unrestricted pluralist” (2007, 253-59). So, I will interpret Tiffany’s “deflationary normative pluralism” as being equivalent to what I am calling “unrestricted pluralism.”

One immediate concern one might have about unrestricted pluralism is that some standards do not seem to be normative domains. Dorsey’s “Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society” is as colorful an example as any (2013, 118). If unrestricted pluralism is true, then we have reasons to follow the Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society – reasons of the Constitution-of-the-Satanic-
Grave-Robbers-Society sort! Many will take this to be a *reductio ad absurdum* against unrestricted pluralism. The unrestricted pluralist, however, has a ready reply: most of us erroneously suppose that that there are no reasons of the Constitution-of-the-Satanic-Grave-Robbers-Society sort because most people are not *partisan* toward that domain. As Tiffany explains:

By denying the supremacy of morality, or any other standpoint for that matter, normative pluralism does not commit one to nonpartisanship. Just as one may be a partisan supporter of the Canucks over the Maple Leafs – perhaps even seeing support for the Leafs as a character flaw, admittedly non-culpable for those raised in greater Toronto – without thinking that there is some deep metaphysical truth backing up one’s partisanship; so too can one be similarly partisan toward, e.g., morality, prudence, or authenticity (2007, 244-45).

A non-pluralist might retort that the Satanist, interrogated about why he adheres to these standards, probably would not appeal to Constitution-of-the-Satanic-Grave-Robbers-Society reasons. Rather, he would be expected to say “because I have taken the blood oath,” or “because Satan is lord,” or “because it is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven” – answers that concede that the society’s standards are not foundational. Perhaps this just shows that we are really imagining an interlocutor with partisanship like our own. Can we do otherwise,
though? Plausibly, our partisanship constrains what sorts of considerations we can take to be reasons. Do they also constrain which of the many standards are normatively relevant to us? In other words: does a person's partisanship affect what normative reasons he has?

Tiffany seems to want to have it both ways on this question. He describes our partisanship as having “deliberative authority” for us. Although “authority” implies normative significance, Tiffany defines “deliberative authority” in apparently nonnormative, psychological terms: “a normative standpoint has deliberative authority for an agent if that agent is disposed to treat the standpoint as a source of contributory reasons that are relevant to her practical deliberations” (2007, 248). One can of course be disposed to treat a standpoint’s recommendations as being normatively significant without their actually being so. Tiffany says that deliberative authority is “merely subjective,” whereas “the concept of genuine deliberative weight must refer to an objective property” (2007, 248).

An unrestricted pluralist could answer the question either way. Let us consider each in turn, starting with what I take to be Tiffany’s considered view: partisanship is a normatively irrelevant, purely psychological matter. In that case, one’s reasons to act in accordance with whatever standard seems most ridiculous or reprehensible to you are normatively on a par with one’s reasons to act in accord with any other set of standards. If all coherent standards are normative domains, then every domain has an equal and opposite domain (except perhaps the domain of “acting coherently”). We have seen Tiffany’s own examples of “anarchy” and
“rudeness,” opposites of lawfulness and etiquette, respectively. We can add ugliness, self-destruction and immorality to the list of hitherto neglected domains.

I claim that such a view is tantamount to nihilism about practical reason. That may be a surprising thing to say. Nihilism about practical reason is the view that one never has reason to do anything; unrestricted pluralism entails that one always has an unlimited number of reasons on every side of every decision. Superficially, it seems as though no two views could be more different. And yet both agree that nothing makes a difference to our normative situation – indeed, nothing could make such a difference. Either we have no reasons counting in favor of anything, or we have an infinite number of reasons, generated by an indefinite number of standards, pulling in every direction. So in some sense all options are on a par, regardless of what circumstances may obtain.

Can normativity be extended this far, even in principle? Consider an analogy with rank. When Burma sought independence from British colonialism, activists and fighters subversively called each other “Thakin,” or “master,” a title of respect that the occupying British officers insisted on being called (Steinberg et al., 2016). If everyone is Thakin, the revolutionaries understood, then no one is. In a perfectly egalitarian society where everyone is called Thakin, the word must be shorn of its original meaning in something like the way that the revolutionaries intended. Likewise, I submit, if all coherent standards are normative domains, then the result seems to be that none are. A normative domain’s recommendations must deserve our respect, and must possess authority over the recommendations of competing
standards at least some of the time. I cannot make sense of the claim that all standards are normative domains any more than I can make sense of the claim that everyone is properly addressed as Thakin, if this is truly a title of distinction. The only sense I can make of the suggestion that all standards are normative domains is that no standards are really normative domains; hence unrestricted pluralism, so understood, collapses into nihilism.68

Suppose now that the unrestricted pluralist answers that partisanship does make a normative difference. Plausibly, only the domains toward which I am partisan are normatively significant for me.69 This view takes seriously the normative implications of Tiffany’s term “deliberative authority” and accommodates the intuition that there are some standards, like the Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society, that give us no reasons for action. The resulting view, however, is subjectivism about practical reason. One’s partisanship cannot be, per unrestricted pluralism, a rational response to any objective features of the standards of which one is a partisan, but some sort of nonrational pro-attitude, or collection of pro-attitudes. Tiffany’s sports analogy suggests as much. Partisanship,

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68 There is no upper limit conceptually on how many of our decisions might be normative ties, with reasons equally balanced on both sides. But I insist on the modal claim: in order for something to be a reason, there must be a possibility of its making a difference in some set of circumstances, even if it never happens in any actual set of circumstances.

69 Is there space for an intermediate position distinct from subjectivism? We could imagine that all coherent standards constitute normative domains, but that one’s partisanship causes some to be more important than others. I do not think that such a position is workable, however. It seems, first of all, that we owe the Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society no role at all in our practical reasoning. Second, the reasons generated by the myriad domains toward which we are nonpartisans would essentially cancel each other out. What would really be carrying the weight would be the domains toward which we are partisan. And so any such compromise must in the end boil down to subjectivism or its practical equivalent.
except in the cases of radical egoists, saints and fanatics of various sorts, will be divided among several domains whose recommendations sometimes conflict. Such dilemmas would seem to be resolvable only through the formation of more specified partisanships.

Let us take stock. I have argued that unrestricted pluralism can be spelled out to make partisanship normatively irrelevant or normatively relevant. Spelled out in the first way, it amounts to, and may actually be, nihilism about practical reason. Spelled out in the second way, it amounts to normative subjectivism. Neither view can be squared with normative pluralism. Nihilism about practical reason is inconsistent with the idea that there are any normative domains, let alone a plurality of them. Subjectivism cannot be accused of being nihilism in drag, but it is a form of normative monism because one’s partisanship (i.e., one’s subjective mental states) alone determines what standards are authoritative for one. If normative pluralism is to be both normative and pluralistic, then unrestricted pluralism must be restricted.

3. Restricted Pluralism

Pluralism is restricted just in case it holds that there is at least one coherent standard that is not a normative domain. The proponent of this form of pluralism wants to separate the wheat from the chaff and insist that content as well as coherence are relevant to a standard’s normative significance. Copp, for example, does not want “moon-love reasons” to be on a par with reasons of morality or self-
interest (2007, 110). Tiffany objects that it is unclear whether the standard of “moon-love” is a coherent standard in the first place (2007, 255). I think Copp has in mind something like “the standard according to which those actions are best that most express love for the moon.” This is apparently coherent. It nonetheless does not seem like a standard that we are obliged to take seriously, as Tiffany acknowledges.

Although, in principle, restricted pluralism could be almost as inclusive as unrestricted pluralism, in practice, restricted pluralists allow for no more than a few domains. This parsimony keeps the view more intuitively appealing than unrestricted pluralism, at least at first blush. Morality and self-interest (sometimes called “prudence”) are the most commonly proposed domains. Others include aesthetics, etiquette, perfectionism and legality. Occasionally, it will be convenient to speak of other standards as if they were normative domains. Stroud considers the case of “social-climbing reasons” – that is, reasons instrumental to the goal of moving up the social ladder in a context in which doing this seems unlikely to do much good. Such reasons, she says, are not “genuine reasons for action” but only domain-relative reasons, or “D-reasons” (1998, 172-73).

Stroud equates genuine reasons for action with reasons simpliciter. Obviously, no restricted pluralist could differentiate D-reasons from the genuine article on that basis, at least without making “genuine reasons for action” an empty category. She could, however, say that “genuine reasons for action” are those that are generated by one of the few normative domains, whereas D-reasons have no
normative force of their own, although they may have instrumental value. Plausible examples of the latter include financial reasons, political reasons and, yes, social-climbing reasons. Reasons relative to standards that do nothing to further the goals of any normative domains, plausibly including the Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society, can be referred to as “*mere* D-reasons.”

Many have thought restricted pluralism to have been refuted by the so-called “argument from notable-nominal comparisons,” discussed by Ruth Chang (1997, 14-17), Derek Parfit (2011, 135), Dale Dorsey (2013, 119-24), Tim Scanlon (1998, 235) and others.\(^7\) This argument features an appeal to intuition. We are asked to imagine a choice between a very small good in one domain (usually self-interest) at the expense of a tremendous cost in another domain (usually morality). To borrow a famous example from Peter Singer (1971; 2010, xi-5), one might have to get one’s clothes wet to rescue a drowning child. We want to say more about this case than that “one morally ought to rescue the child, but self-interestedly ought not to rescue the child.” We want to say something like “one just plain ought to do what you morally ought to do.” And so we are pushed toward positing an all-things-considered domain capable of issuing supremely authoritative “oughts” like this.

Perhaps we should not be so confident that this argument succeeds. Sagdahl has recently advanced a compelling response to this objection that allows the

\(^7\) In principle, the argument could be directed against unrestricted pluralism. It would, however, be much less dialectically effective against an unrestricted pluralist because the argument relies on intuitions of a kind that the unrestricted pluralist is happy to disregard or explain away. Someone who is comfortable positing *Constitution-of-the-Satanic-Grave-Robbers-Society* reasons, though it seems for all the world that there are no such things, will not be troubled in simply biting the bullet in this case, too. As far as I am aware, everyone who has pressed the argument from notable-nominal comparisons has pressed it against restricted pluralism.
restricted pluralist to accommodate the relevant intuition. He claims that “all things considered ought” need not be interpreted as an appeal to the verdict of an all-things-considered domain:

Instead, “ought all things considered” can be given a quantificational interpretation. Whenever standpoints are in agreement, we can make a universal quantification over them. Suppose that you ought to F both from the moral and prudential standpoint, so that you both morally and prudentially ought to F. If these are the only relevant standpoints, we can say truly that from all normative standpoints, you ought to F. No intertype commensuration of reasons is involved in reaching this conclusion (2014, 410-11).

This kind of response would not work if the various domains did not generally concur in their recommendations, but concurrence seems plausible at least in the cases of morality and self-interest. Committing moral atrocities does not usually advance one’s self-interest. A policy of promoting one’s own self-interest would rule out committing atrocities, especially when the expected payoff is trivial. Philosophers can stipulate that no bad consequences (self-interestedly speaking) will result from a particular instance of morally bad behavior, but our intuitions may not keep up with unrealistic stipulations. So the pluralist can say that we have good reason in every domain to adopt a policy of always choosing the notable good in
notable-nominal cases. Our knowledge of this general rule renders unreliable our intuitions about weird cases.

A couple of points of criticism are in order. First, note the more normative domains the pluralist posits beyond morality and self-interest, the less likely that they will generally concur. Sagdahl’s reply works best as a defense of dualism between morality and self-interest; it is likely to be less persuasive as a defense of other forms of pluralism that include more domains than these two. What is more, the non-pluralist can modify the argument so that we are invited to consider choices between two notable goods, one of which seems much more notable than the other. Nonetheless, if Sagdahl has not put paid to the argument, he has at least shown that it may not be the decisive refutation of restricted pluralism that many have thought it to be. In what follows, I present two new arguments against restricted pluralism that I think are more decisive, especially when considered jointly.

3.1. The Sorting Problem

According to restricted pluralism, not all coherent standards are normatively on a par. What differentiates them? What determines why some standards are to be taken seriously, but not others? In principle, a restricted pluralist could say that this is a matter of brute fact, and there is nothing to be said about why morality,

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71 Sagdahl, anticipating this criticism, considers a case in which someone must either pay $200,000 or allow all Falklanders to die. The prospect of losing that sum of money, for the average person, can hardly be considered a "nominal" loss, and so it is plausible that morality and self-interest really diverge in this case. And yet many will insist that it is unreasonable, all things considered, to allow all Falklanders to die in order to keep the money. Sagdahl replies to his own objection in part by saying that, given the costs at stake, it is plausible to think that either action may be rationally acceptable (2014, 420-24). But what if we lower the cost to $3,000?
but not the Constitution of the Satanic Grave Robbers Society, is a normative domain. Intuitively, though, that some standards deserve to be respected, and others do not, cries out for an explanation. Copp, a restricted pluralist, recognizes this and attempts to provide one. What differentiates the reason-generating standpoints from the non-reason-generating standpoints, according to Copp, is that reason-giving standpoints are “devices” suited to ameliorate some “problem of normative governance” facing humanity. Copp writes that:

the capacity of humans to deal successfully with these problems depends on their subscribing to systems of norms or standards. Our subscription to these systems enables us to deal with the relevant problems. This is the basic fact that underlies all normativity. For example, the function of morality is to ameliorate the problem of sociality. The normative systems that have a relevant normative status, according to pluralist-teleology, are abstract systems of rules that, when subscribed to and complied with by enough of the people in their scope, enable us to deal with such problems. The function of the various normative systems of this sort that play characteristic roles in human life is to enable us to cope with these problems (2009, 26).

He continues:
We need the cooperation of others to achieve what we value, no matter what we value, within at least a wide range of things we might value. We also need the existence of a minimum level of peace and stability in society. We need to live peacefully and cooperatively together (2009, 27).

Other alleged problems of normative governance include the problems of autonomy and politeness, and the epistemic problem, which are answered by the normative domains of prudence, etiquette and epistemic rationality, respectively (2009, 27-28). Tiffany is rightly unimpressed by this response, which he perceives to be a relocation of the problem:72

But, to my mind, this simply pushes the question back a level; for now we must know why facilitation of pleasing and comfortable interactions is a genuine problem of normative governance but facilitation of unpleasant and confrontational interactions is not. While most of us value security and may accept a system of law as an authoritative device for securing that security, one can imagine a group of anarchists who despise security and seek a normative system that solves the problem of anarchy (2007, 258-59).

We can press Tiffany’s point further by focusing on the question of what, exactly, constitutes a “problem” or a “need” in this context. Copp could cash these

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72 Tiffany’s response to Copp (2009) is available in the online (2013) version of the (2007) article.
out in purely descriptive terms, which would be consistent with his naturalism. For example, a “need” could be whatever most human beings strongly desire, and a “problem” could be whatever gives most human beings a sense of anxiety. But if these are understood in purely descriptive terms, reducible to complexes of psychological states, then it is mysterious why they, as opposed to other bundles of descriptive properties, should be normatively foundational. It is mysterious why they, as opposed to something else, should determine what standards are normative domains. Copp’s purported solution thus leaves the sorting problem unresolved.

If, on the other hand, “problems” and “needs” are understood in normative terms, then we are entitled to ask the pluralist: “which normative terms?” To understand them within the framework of any one domain results in the appearance of self-selection – one domain simply declaring its own concerns to be the most important. For example, suppose the pluralist were to say that these needs morally ought to be met by those who can meet them, and these problems ought morally to be solved by those who can solve them. Why should we defer to morality’s standards to explain which problems, and which needs, are foundational for normativity? Could we not equally well defer to the standards of self-interest, or the Satanic Grave Robbers Society, or what have you, to tell us what our problems and needs are?

If the “ought” implicated in Copp’s “problems” and “needs” cannot be internal to any one domain, then could it perhaps be shared by many domains? Perhaps the pluralist can borrow a page from Sagdahl and say that the “problems” and “needs”
that matter are the ones that we “all things considered ought” to care about (meaning, on Sagdahl’s account, that all normative domains concur on their importance). But we can just as well ask, “Which coalition of standards determines which things one ‘all things considered ought’ to do?” Morality, self-interest, aesthetics, etiquette and legality might concur that one should do A, but their evil twins, immorality, self-destruction, ugliness and rudeness, might concur that one should not do A. If we opt for the former, we allow one coalition to sort itself into the good pile without having any special authority to do so. So the same problem reoccurs.

None of this would be very disconcerting to the pluralist if the same problem bedeviled the non-pluralist: “a problem for all is a problem for none.” The non-pluralist can say that we ought *simpliciter* to care about only some oughts (McLeod (2001, 274-75)). But because ought *simpliciter* has properties that the various rival oughts of restricted pluralism are not claimed to have, no self-selection problem arises here. Ought *simpliciter* is by definition comprehensive and normatively authoritative, and therefore peerless. Deference to the one kind of “ought” that has these properties over one that does not cannot be called arbitrary. Of course, we might think it a problem to determine what things we ought *simpliciter* to do, but that is a different problem, and one not unique to ought *simpliciter*. We might equally well ask why we morally ought to do the things we morally ought to do, for example.
Perhaps some other solution for the sorting problem will be proposed on behalf of the restricted pluralist. Nothing, however, seems promising, and so I conclude that it remains an outstanding problem for the restricted pluralist. Unfortunately, restricted pluralism faces an even more serious objection to which I now turn.

3.2. The Concurrence Argument

Philosophers who have investigated pluralism have tended to focus on wrenching cases of conflict between the reasons of two domains, where the stakes are high on both sides. Sidgwick was famously unsettled by the implications of “the rarer cases of a recognized conflict between self-interest and duty” (Sidgwick (1963/1874, 508)). Thomas Nagel makes it clear in “The Fragmentation of Value” that conflict cases are his main concern (1979, 128-32). Copp, likewise, specifically addresses “situations where moral reasons and reasons of self-interest conflict” (2007, 285). David Brink suggests that harmony among the domains of practical reason would solve or ameliorate the challenges posed by pluralism (1997, 291). The fixation on hard cases of conflict has had one unfortunate upshot: philosophers have paid scant attention to concurrent cases, in which the recommendations of normative domains agree, or partially agree, on what course of action is best (or at least on what range of options are among the best). Here I aim to show that we can learn something about normative pluralism by thinking about concurrent cases.
Copp (1997) retells the story of Gyges that Glaucon tells Socrates in *The Republic* (Plato 1997, 359c-61d). Gyges, a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia, discovers a ring with the power to make him invisible. Gyges uses it the way Glaucon thinks we all would: to live a self-indulgent life, unencumbered by morality. Gyges has an affair with the queen, then conspires to murder her husband and make himself king. Copp describes Gyges as having two options: living a morally good but self-interestingly bad life as a shepherd, or living a morally bankrupt life but “living well” as king. Gyges, on Copp’s telling, is in a position in which he is, in Thomas Reid’s words, “reduced to this miserable dilemma, whether it is be best to be a fool or a knave” (1969/1788, 257).

Pluralism accommodates widely held intuitions about these cases. It seems that in such scenarios there is nothing to do but make a nonrational leap to one side or the other, to make what Tiffany calls an “agential choice” (2007, 244). But I think that non-pluralism can also satisfactorily accommodate our intuitions about such cases. We can, without accepting pluralism, think that we are occasionally faced with ties at the highest normative level, so that we ought *simpliciter* to do either A or B, but not one of them in particular.\(^73\) The non-pluralist can also say that it is generally hard to know what to do when the stakes are high on either side of some decision, even if all the reasons in play are of the same kind. We do not, when confronted with intra-domain hard cases, assume that there is no best option by the standards of whatever domain it is we are considering. Neither should we in inter-
domain hard cases leap to the conclusion that there is no option that we ought *simpliciter* to do.

So non-pluralists can deal well enough with the “best case” for pluralism. On the other hand, there is a different dilemma that pluralism cannot deal with very well. Consider a modification of the Gyges story in which Gyges has a third option that allows him both to live well and to live morally. Suppose that the current king plans to abdicate soon, but has not named a successor. The Lydians have a less-than-venerable tradition, when this happens, of choosing their leaders based upon their entertainment skills, rather than their ability to govern (a practice not unknown in modern societies). So, fortunately for Gyges, the next king is to be chosen by a public magic trick contest. (Naturally, no one thought to include a rule disqualifying those possessing genuinely magic trinkets.) Gyges has an easy and legitimate path to the throne.74

Gyges’ decision is now between three options. As with the original story, choice one is to remain a shepherd and choice two is to seize power illegitimately. (Maybe he coerces the king into naming him the successor, obviating any need for any public magic contest.) Choice three is to compete in the magic contest and become king legitimately. This option is just as good for Gyges as seizing the throne through force or subterfuge would be. It is morally good, too, since being a king (let us say) is honorable work, though not morally better than remaining a shepherd.

74 I thank Neil Sinhababu for helping me fine-tune this example.
After all, given how the successor to the king is to be chosen, Gyges has no reason to believe that he is either better or worse at governing than the average competitor.

**Table 1. The Gyges Concurrent Case**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1. Remain a shepherd</th>
<th>2. Use ring wickedly</th>
<th>3. Use ring morally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-interest</strong></td>
<td>Bad (-1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Morality</strong></td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
<td>Bad (-1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among these choices, I suspect that you would not hesitate to recommend 3, the course of action that is unique in being both as self-interestedly good as any other option, and as morally good as any other option. You might even want to say that Gyges *ought* to choose 3. We are stipulating, along with Copp, that self-interest and morality are the only domains in play. The “ought” by which we ought to choose 3 does not seem to be either; it seems Gyges ought *simpliciter* to choose 3, a result that is inconsistent with restricted pluralism.\(^{76}\) I call this the “concurrence argument.” The pluralist can respond either by “biting the bullet” – rejecting the

\(^{75}\) The numbers are meant to signify units of whatever kind of reason is commensurate within the domain, not all-things-considered reasons. More complicated convergence cases can be constructed that involve many different domains. Imagine for the sake of simplicity that all three options are tied in every other domain.

\(^{76}\) The argument could not as successfully be run against unrestricted pluralism because, for the restricted pluralist, there will be usually ignored domains on the other side – immorality and self-destruction would concur that 3 is the worst thing that Gyges could do. That might seem implausible, but that objection takes us back to the discussion in section 2.
intuition that Gyges ought to choose 3 – or by trying to explain how restricted pluralism can accommodate the “ought” in play. Let us consider each in turn.\textsuperscript{77}

First is the option to reject the intuition. Morally, Gyges ought to choose 1 or 3; self-interestedly, Gyges ought to choose 2 or 3. The pluralist could assent to such propositions as “3 is the only option that is good according to both morality and self-interest” or “3 is the only option that does not have one strike against it, in some domain or other.” Gyges would probably infer from these statements that he ought to choose 3, but the pluralist would have to insist that no such implications follow. Given the force of the intuitions to the contrary, it seems that the pluralist needs recourse to some kind of error theory. Again it seems that the pluralist would do best to appeal to partisanship, understood in a nonnormative way. This reply might go:

Sure, it appears to you that Gyges ought \textit{simpliciter} to choose 3. But that is only because you are partisan to morality. We can imagine an amoralist who only cares about self-interest; he would be completely indifferent between options 2 and 3. And so your strong intuition that Gyges ought to choose 3 can be assumed to be derivative from your preferences, not from any normative considerations.

\textsuperscript{77} Henceforth, unless I explicitly say otherwise, I mean the “restricted pluralist.”
The problem with that reply is that we are supposed to be assuming the truth of restricted pluralism, according to which there is a plurality of normative domains. For the sake of giving a vivid example, it is necessary to construct the concurrent case as occurring between two particular domains. I chose morality and self-interest because they are the least controversial. The amoralist is either someone who does not consider morality to be a normative domain, or else someone who recognizes that it is a normative domain, but who refuses to take those reasons into consideration. In the first case, he just has not accepted what I am stipulating, and what must be stipulated for any reductio ad absurdum against restricted pluralism, i.e., that there is an irreducible plurality of different normative domains of which self-interest is just one. In the second case, he is being irrational. What, after all, is more paradigmatically irrational than refusing to take known reasons into consideration?

A further way to resist this pluralist response is to point out that it is the general structure of the problem that causes trouble for pluralism. The following represents the structure of the Gyges case I began with (let X and Y represent two normative domains and 1, 2 and 3 represent the available courses of action):

Table 2. The Generic Concurrent Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Bad (-1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
<td>Bad (-1,000)</td>
<td>Good (+1,000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We are in the dark about what normative domains X and Y are; we know only that they are genuine normative domains, not mere D-reasons. This assumes nothing that the restricted pluralist is not already committed to. Even at this level of generality where our partisanship do not seem to be interfering, we can recognize that choosing 3 is, in some sense, a best.\textsuperscript{78} If asked which of these three actions one would recommend in this generic case, I suspect most people would choose 3. They may even add “obviously.”

If our interlocutor were to reject the intuition that 3 is the best choice available, then we could press a further argument. The only difference between 1 and 3 is that 3 is good according to the standards of X, whereas 1 is bad by the standards of X. Likewise, the only difference between 2 and 3 is that 3 is good and 2 is bad, according to domain Y. So, in any pairwise comparison with one of its competitors, 3 is better in some normative domain, and is never worse in any respect. The following seems true:

\textit{Reason Principle}. For any two courses of action, A and B, if all of the reasons in favor of A also count in favor of B, but not all of the reasons in favor of B count in favor of A, then B is the most reasonable course of action to take.

By the \textit{Reason Principle}, 3 is the most reasonable action to take. Maybe “most reasonable choice” does not translate to “the choice that ought to be taken.” Some

\textsuperscript{78} For reasons that will be clear momentarily, I hesitate to describe 3 as the option that one “ought to” choose.
think that “ought” implies obligation, whereas the “most reasonable choice” may be the best of many permissible options. Suppose, though, that we stipulate that the stakes are high, that the bad is very bad in that domain and the good is very good in that domain. With this stipulated, it seems correct to say that one ought to choose 3 with even the most full-throated sense of “ought.” After all, it seems right that one ought to choose the best option when there are no costs for doing so, and very high costs for failing to do so. It is especially reckless to make any suboptimal decisions when we do not know what the high costs are! Doing otherwise does not seem permissible.

I turn now to the pluralist’s second line of defense, the claim that pluralism can accommodate the intuition that 3 is the best. The challenge is that, in Copp’s Gyges case, self-interest and morality were stipulated to be the only normative domains in play; the “ought” that favors 3 appears to take both of these into account and issue a comprehensive and authoritative verdict. It appears, in other words, to be ought simpliciter. Sagdahl, as we have seen, has found a way to allow the pluralist to talk about “all things considered ought.” But his quantificational interpretation of “all things considered ought” requires that all normative domains concur on a course of action; here, they concur only that 3 is among the best choices. So his account will not yield the result that Gyges ought to choose 3.

The best response for the pluralist, I think, would be to claim that Gyges both morally and self-interestedly ought to choose 3. It is plausibly immoral to disregard one’s own self-interest without justification. It is less obvious that one has a self-
interested reason to be moral when there is no reason not to be, but one could
defend a view of wellbeing according to which self-interest and morality are
entangled in this way, a possibility that Sagdahl considers (2014, 413-17). If that is
right, then morality would not be indifferent to a choice between 1 and 3, and
neither would self-interest be indifferent to a choice between 2 and 3; both prefer 3.
So there is no need to posit any ought *simpliciter* to account for our intuition. We
can account for it fully given only the first-order normative domains that the
pluralist accepts.

There are two problems with this response, however. It requires the pluralist
to adopt controversial accounts of wellbeing and morality. It also fails to capture the
intuitive force of the generic concurrent case. Intuitively, 3 is the most reasonable
and, if the stakes are high enough, the one choice we ought to make. We know this
without knowing anything about the content of domains X and Y. So it seems to me
that pluralism can neither adequately explain away the intuition that Gyges ought
to choose 3 in my variation of the Gyges case, nor accommodate the sense of “ought”
that it implies.

There remains one maneuver that the restricted pluralist can make to avoid
the arguments that I have presented. Recall that the third criterion for normative
pluralism was:

*No authoritative adjudication:* There is no “all things considered” domain
capable of issuing verdicts about what one ought *simpliciter* to do; hence, no
authority exists that is capable of adjudicating disputes between normative domains.

I have argued in this section that we should posit ought *simpliciter* to explain why, in both the concurrent Gyges case and the generic concurrent case, option 3 is intuitively best. If that is right, then this principle is false; it follows that normative pluralism, as we have been considering it until now, must also be false. But it does not rule out all forms of pluralism. It is possible to formulate the third criterion so that it is logically consistent with the existence of an “all things considered” domain and ought *simpliciter*. Consider:

*No authoritative adjudication*\(^*\): Whenever two or more normative domains issue conflicting recommendations, there is no one thing that ought *simpliciter* to be done.

If we modify pluralism so that this is its third criterion, then pluralism is logically consistent with the claim that we ought *simpliciter* to choose 3 in concurrence cases. If we accept this version of pluralism, and also accept ought *simpliciter*, then we arrive at what Dorsey calls “substantive pluralism”\(^{79}\) and what David Phillips calls “permissive pluralism” (2011, 135). On that view, there is an

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\(^{79}\) I am modifying Dorsey’s terminology slightly here. His exact words are “substantive dualism” rather than “substantive pluralism” because he considers a version of pluralism in which only morality and self-interest are domains.
all-things-considered domain, but it is indifferent between the choices in all cases of inter-domain conflict. In other words, whenever we encounter conflicts between domains, it is not irrational to take either choice. We can speak of both options being permissible so long as we do not read moral content into the word – either option is rationally permissible, or permissible from the all-things-considered perspective. This kind of pluralism is immune to the concurrence argument, but there appear to be independent reasons for rejecting it.

The primary problem for substantive pluralism, Dorsey argues, is that we have no reason for thinking that an all-things-considered domain would evaluate all options, in all conflict cases, as ties. If the version of substantive pluralism we are considering includes domains other than morality and self-interest, then it is likely to seem to us that some domains are more important, all things considered, than others (e.g., morality seems much more important than etiquette). And, within domains, some courses of action come more strongly recommended than others (e.g., morality recommends “do not murder” versus “do not lie,” but the former much more strongly). No explanation is forthcoming as to why all of these disparate options would be evaluated as ties from the perspective of Reason-as-such. Dorsey concludes that the most formidable version of pluralism is what he calls “structural pluralism,” which denies that there is an all-things-considered domain, or ought simpliciter, in the first place (2013, 117-27). So while the concurrent-cases objection is not decisive against all forms of pluralism, it is compelling against the most plausible form of pluralism.
4. Conclusion

I have argued that normative pluralism must be restricted and that restricted normative pluralism suffers from two problems: the sorting problem and the concurrent-case argument. The combined force of these two arguments, to my mind, justifies the conclusion that restricted pluralism is false. Hence, we should reject normative pluralism. Because pluralism includes the idea that one never ought *simpliciter* to do anything, its negation is compatible with our sometimes having irresolvable dilemmas. Our reasons may have, in Susan Wolf’s words, “pockets of indeterminacy” (1994: 788). But the falsity of normative pluralism means that we are not forced to accept the conclusion that there is indeterminacy whenever we face a dilemma of this kind. The “cosmos of duty” may not be as orderly as we would like, but neither are they necessarily “reduced to a chaos”\(^\text{80}\) as Sidgwick feared, by the possibility of inter-domain normative conflicts.\(^\text{81}\)

\(^{80}\) This famous and colorful line in the first edition of *The Methods of Ethics* was removed from subsequent editions. I quote it from Schneewind (1977, 352).

\(^{81}\) Thanks to Chris Heathwood, Alastair Norcross, Graham Oddie, Michael Huemer, Tyler Paytas, Jim Skidmore and the two anonymous referees for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.
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