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Moral Disagreement and Epistemic Advantages: A Challenge to McGrath

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MANY OF MY MORAL VIEWS ARE CONTROVERSIAL, which means that a good number of people out there believe these views are incorrect. Moreover, I am at least somewhat motivated to be moral. How much should it worry me that so many people think my views are mistaken, and likely to lead me astray?

If Sarah McGrath (2008; 2011) is right, it should worry me a fair amount. According to her arguments, I am not in a position to regard my own moral judgment as any more credible than any other person's judgment. If everyone, or nearly everyone, agrees with me, I can be fairly confident my view is justified, but I cannot claim anything like this kind of consensus for my beliefs that (a) same-sex marriages should be legally recognized (at least in economically developed democracies¹), and (b) that women should be treated more or less as equals to men (pretty much everywhere).² (I will refer to these views as "marriage equality" and "gender equality," respectively.) Many people think that marriage equality and gender equality are, in fact, *immoral*. So McGrath's position implies that I should have serious doubts about whether it is wrong to vote in favor of gay marriage, or oppose religious sexism, for instance.

Her argument is based on two controversial positions. First, she adopts a version of what is often called the *Equal Weight View*, which holds that I should give the opinions of those I regard as epistemic peers about the same weight I give to my own opinions. Second, she argues for a position I will call the *Moral Peer View*, which holds that I should regard others as my epistemic peers on moral questions.³ While both of these views are controversial, I think that at least some version of the Equal Weight View is correct, and I

¹ I include this hedge mainly because I can imagine it being logistically impossible or strategically unwise to legalize gay marriage in some places. As a general ethical claim, I think same-sex marriage should be permitted and accepted everywhere, but there may be countries where there is no way this could be achieved without a breakdown in civil order, or where civil liberties are tenuous enough that there is a real danger of legal registration being used as a tool for targeted discrimination. In that case, I would argue that same-sex marriage should be recognized once circumstances allow, but would not want to commit myself to the claim that they should be legalized *now*.

² This belief is left intentionally vague, to avoid getting into the specifics of what kind of equality I think is best. Some notions of equality – e.g., being given the opportunity to luckily win acceptance in a male-dominated industry – I would not consider adequate, while other notions – e.g., both sexes being given medical treatments that ignore sex differences – strike me as silly. Still, even left in this vague form, it should be clear that a great many people around the globe reject the claim that women should be treated as equals with men.

³ Note that, as I formulate it here, the MPV does not require that we believe there is no such thing as a person who is not a moral peer, but only that we should *regard* others as our peers, given our circumstances.

shall assume as much in this paper. Instead, I will concentrate on the Moral Peer View. Under pressure from Nathan King (2011a), McGrath admits that the Moral Peer View need not always have been true, though she maintains it is true now. Although King seems to think there should be current counterexamples to the Moral Peer View, he holds back from actually proposing any. I will make a tentative case that many of us who favor marriage equality and gender equality are currently in a position to reject the Moral Peer View with regard to these issues, and I will propose general conditions under which people can reasonably take their disputed moral beliefs to be epistemically advantaged, relative to those who disagree.

1. McGrath's Position

McGrath's central argument aims to show that our controversial moral beliefs do not amount to knowledge, but I will focus mainly on one particular premise, which is, for my purposes, more troubling than her conclusion. That premise is:

P1. Our controversial moral beliefs are *CONTROVERSIAL* (2008: 92).

Several terms here require some explanation. First, when McGrath speaks of "our controversial moral beliefs" she means

our beliefs about the correct answers to the kinds of questions that tend to be hotly contested in the applied ethics literature as well as in the broader culture (ibid.).

And a belief of mine is *CONTROVERSIAL* if it meets certain conditions made famous by Sidgwick:

I find [it] in direct conflict with a judgment of some other mind ... and ... I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own (Sidgwick 1907, 342, quoted on McGrath 2008: 91).

So, in brief, P1 asserts that, on hotly contested ethical questions, we have just as much reason to think ourselves mistaken as those who disagree with us.

In her definition of "our controversial moral beliefs," it is unclear whether McGrath means beliefs that are debated in *both* academic circles and the broader culture, or those that are debated in *one* of the two spheres. She goes on to argue, though, that academics should not regard their moral beliefs as more credible than those of laypeople (97-99), so she seems to have the latter interpretation in mind.⁴

⁴ In fact, if ethicists have no special qualifications, then some ethical views that are subject to fierce controversy in the ethics literature might not be uncertain in the way McGrath suggests; Peter Singer's views on charity, for instance, are much less popular in the general public than in academic circles, and might be considered too marginal to take seriously if we do not privilege the judgment of philosophical ethicists in some way.

I find P1 much more troubling than McGrath's conclusion that moral beliefs do not amount to knowledge. On some accounts of knowledge, it would not be all that troubling to find out that our beliefs fall *somewhat short* of being justified enough to count as knowledge. McGrath's claim that my controversial beliefs are **CONTROVERSIAL** presents a much more serious challenge to my moral decision-making. If I am motivated to be moral, and other people whom I must regard as no less trustworthy than myself think I am mistaken about what is right and wrong, then (according to the EWV) this calls into question whether I can rationally think my views are justified at all. The trouble, as David Christensen puts it, is that widespread disagreement seems to show me that we are in "benighted conditions" and that I cannot trust my own judgments (Christensen 2007: 216). The major question, then, is whether P1 is true – that is, whether our controversial beliefs are **CONTROVERSIAL**.

The fact that a belief is controversial does not, by itself, show that a belief is **CONTROVERSIAL**. McGrath notes that some kinds of beliefs can be hotly debated by the public even when there is a consensus or near-consensus among the relevant experts (think evolution or global warming), and, if we know this sort of expert consensus supports our beliefs, said beliefs are therefore controversial but not **CONTROVERSIAL** (2008: 96). But, she argues, we are not currently in a position to identify moral experts (*ibid.*: 97-99), so our controversial moral beliefs remain **CONTROVERSIAL**.

Of course, many people would argue that we *can* identify moral experts; candidates include those we take to be wise or morally exemplary, or those who have studied moral theory extensively. McGrath offers two reasons to reject these sorts of credentials. First, and apparently most importantly, she points out that there is no "*independent check*, one not itself subject to significant controversy, by which we can tell who is (and who is not) getting things right" (97). Second, she points out that philosophers' thorough examination of moral issues has not produced "convergence of opinion" (98). A similar problem arises for those thought wise and morally exemplary; exemplars of different cultures and moral traditions are apt to disagree about the answers to controversial moral questions. She grants that there could be moral experts, in the sense that there could be people who are much better than others at answering moral questions correctly, but that, things being how they are, we are in no position to identify moral experts, even if we ourselves do happen to be experts (97-99).

McGrath apparently takes it to be the case that, if we cannot identify moral experts, we have no more reason to think those who disagree with us are mistaken than we have to think ourselves mistaken. This conditional is not obviously true, however; even if there are no experts, *per se*, there could be reasons to think it more likely that those who disagree with us are mistaken. But a charitable interpretation would be that McGrath thinks her arguments that we cannot identify moral experts would show also that we cannot identify which moral beliefs are more justified. If there is no independent

check we can use to determine how moral beliefs can be made more accurate, and putative standards of justification do not produce convergence of opinion, we might as well say that we cannot identify which moral beliefs are more or less justified. Since this seems to be the line of thinking McGrath has in mind, she seems to accept what I call the Moral Peer View (MPV).

2. Implications

At first blush, it might sound admirably egalitarian to regard everyone as a moral peer. But the implications of accepting both the Equal Weight View (EWV) and the MPV are somewhat unsettling. Treating others as our moral peers is not simply a matter of being polite and respectful. If we take every other person to be just as likely as ourselves to be right, we are committed to the view that we are probably wrong in any case where a large majority disagrees with us.

What would be the results? As a first approximation, we might look to the most recent Gallup Poll of Americans' opinions on controversial moral issues (Riffkin 2014). If the poll is representative and the views of all participants are regarded as equally credible (and held with equal confidence), we ought to more or less suspend judgment about physician-assisted suicide and abortion, the issues on which Americans are most divided. We should be near suspending judgment about whether homosexuality or medical testing on animals is morally acceptable, though we can lean cautiously toward tolerance. In all these cases, the EWV and the MPV would encourage us to become very uncertain and tentative, which might be regarded as admirably humble. But if a large majority of those we regard as equally credible agree, we are pressured to accept the common view with a high degree of confidence. The Gallup Poll reports that large majorities agree that suicide, polygamy and human cloning are wrong, that birth control is acceptable, and that it is wrong for a married person to have an affair. Some of these results may reinforce beliefs we already felt confident about. But, in my case, at least one result would significantly alter my beliefs⁵: While I have doubts, it seems to me that there is nothing inherently wrong with human cloning. If I accept that large majorities are right, then not only would I be committed to reversing my view on human cloning, I would be committed to becoming highly confident about a topic on which I now have only tentative views. While the EWV and the MPV may demand that we be humble relative to other people,

⁵ Depending on how we define terms, I might not agree that polygamy and extramarital affairs are intrinsically wrong; I think there is nothing generally wrong with people freely entering nonmonogamous marriages, so long as there is no institutional sexism, or with open marriages as long as there is no deception or betrayal. But I take it that most poll respondents are expressing disapproval of the most familiar forms of polygamy and affairs, which do involve institutional sexism and betrayal, respectively. I suspect the vast majority would also reject the sorts of plural marriage and open marriage I think are morally acceptable, but I am not sure how many people have actually considered the matter.

they do not demand epistemic humility regarding popular answers to tough questions.

But the MPV given above has more radical implications than all that. After all, it does not tell us to suppose that every *American* has equally credible moral judgment, but that *everyone* has equally credible moral judgment. I have no good polling data for people's views on moral issues around the globe; at best, we might take some educated guesses about what people think. We might start by thinking about the major debates between cultures, and consider how many people are included in various culture groups. But then we must also recall that the dominant moral positions of some culture groups may not be reliable indicators of the moral views of all members of those groups. We know about the official ideologies of North Korea, China, Iran and Cuba, but we also know that there are repressed segments of those populations that oppose the dominant ideologies – and it is unclear how large those segments are. Similarly, some cultures have values we regard as highly sexist, but it is unclear whether all the women in those cultures actually accept what we think of as the dominant view, so it is unclear whether these sexist values are accepted by even half of the population – though they could well be.

Nonetheless, I think it is safe to venture that a significant majority of the globe is morally opposed to gay marriage. And while I am not sure whether a majority of the globe would support sexist institutional inequality between men and women, I suspect that the EWV and MPV would push me toward uncertainty about gender equality.

As Killoren (2010) points out, the question would not necessarily be settled even if we could effectively poll the entire world – after all, a great many people are no longer alive. Barring further argument, the MPV seems to imply that we should give equal regard to moral judgments from people in the past as well. Killoren suggests, for instance, that a majority of our epistemic peers and superiors throughout history have probably had pro-slavery intuitions (14). There are numerous ways to resist this claim, but the MPV is incompatible with many of them.⁶

⁶ At least two strategies might be fruitful, even if the MPV is right. First, exponential population growth since the 19th century, coinciding with growing disapproval of slavery, makes it unclear whether there have been more people with pro-slavery views than anti-slavery views, even if pro-slavery people outnumbered anti-slavery people throughout most of human history (cf. Killoren 2010: 25). Second, though we see acceptance of slavery expressed throughout much of history, it could well be that those who accepted slavery were actually in the minority most of the time – after all, those whose views are passed down to us are likely to have been the powerful and privileged, and they are also the ones most likely to benefit from slavery. Killoren's own solution to the problem relies on a vague notion that we can give less weight to views that we can regard as "rigged" – but I find this notion too unclear to be convincing.

3. Slavery

Is McGrath then committed to accepting that slavery is permissible, or at least that it is unclear whether or not it is permissible? It seems so, if Killoren's claim is true:

[S] Among those who are either my epistemic peers or my epistemic superiors, a majority intuit that slavery is permissible in the Typical Case (20).

The "Typical Case" is "a case typical of slavery in the antebellum American South (9).⁷

Is [S] true? McGrath appears not to think so (cf. 2011: 239). How can she resist this claim? There are several ways: She does not say that it is impossible for there to be situations in which the MPV is false. She grants that we can think our judgment more credible than our opponents' if their judgment is based entirely on fallacious arguments (McGrath 2008: 103). In the same spirit, we can probably surmise that she would also allow that our judgment is more credible than our opponents' if their judgment is based on beliefs that can be readily shown false.

Still, this leaves most controversial moral views unmoved. In most controversies, there are many people who continue to find their original views intuitively compelling, even if it turns out that their arguments were unsound. Killoren points out that a great many people with pro-slavery views continued to find slavery intuitively acceptable, even though they had the same facts as opponents of slavery, and their views were not logically inconsistent (2010, § 5).⁸

⁷ Incidentally, I think Killoren is too hasty in claiming that most people throughout history have approved of the "Typical Case." The kind of slavery typical of the antebellum American South was not typical of slavery throughout history. The system of slavery common in the New World for 400 years was uncommonly brutal, and more racially charged than most other forms of slavery. Spartacus and Epictetus experienced very different and less degrading kinds of slavery.

⁸ I will register here a few doubts about Killoren's arguments. First, I am not prepared to so quickly assume that most advocates of slavery did not contradict themselves. However, Killoren makes a fine point that most pro-slavery positions could probably be put into a logically consistent (if theoretically inelegant) form (21-22) and I agree that proponents of slavery could fall back to this position if inconsistencies were pointed out to them. Second, while logically consistent views are coherent in a minimal sense, more robust notions of coherence (cf. Sayre-McCord 1985) probably have the resources to argue that anti-slavery views are *more* coherent than pro-slavery views, even if pro-slavery views are not incoherent per se. However, Killoren is writing on the subject of moral intuitionism, and it is highly controversial whether it is epistemically better to have a more coherent moral theory at the expense of dismissing intuitions, or a moral theory that preserves more intuitions at the cost of being less theoretically unified. So, we cannot simply help ourselves to the claims that the more coherent view is epistemically superior, as long as neither view is self-contradictory. Third, and perhaps most relevant, Killoren seems to ignore the fact that the institution of slavery, especially in the antebellum South, was supported by widespread misinformation about the nature of race and racial difference, and the capacities of black people. He might be in a po-

McGrath seems prepared to accept, though, that we now have an epistemic advantage over those who accepted slavery in the past, the most obvious advantage being that we are now in a position to recognize many racist claims as generally false, which were at least open questions for people in the past who believed in, for instance, race essentialism of one sort or another. Moreover, under pressure from King (2011a), McGrath admits

it is plausible that the abolitionists *themselves* had good reason to believe the higher-level claim that ... they were in a better epistemic position than their dissenters. They had good reason to think that considerable financial interests in the slave trade skewed their dissenters' moral intuitions or capacities for moral judgment (King, 226, quoted and affirmed on McGrath 2011: 239).

In earlier arguments, McGrath seems to hold that non-inferential intuitions, at least, could not be thought more or less credible (unless perhaps they were self-contradictory), but here she admits that *bias* might be a source of distortion and error. Again, we have no independent check to show that financial interests bias people's moral views and make them less accurate, but the idea receives strong inductive support from the fact that biases (especially things like financial interests) can distort other kinds of views.

McGrath's argument that we cannot identify moral experts, then, turns out to require some adjustment. Even if we cannot identify moral experts *per se*, we can have reasons to think that others are more likely to be mistaken. But still she poses an odd challenge (2011: 239-40): Granted, some people in the past might have been able to identify themselves as having moral expertise on some issues, but can we really say that there is any current controversy in which one side is clearly dependent on bad arguments, false information or obvious biases? King suggests that we can expect the present to resemble the past, but does not make the case for there being moral experts in any specific current controversy (2011b).

4. Marriage Equality and Gender Equality

My views on marriage equality and gender equality certainly seem to qualify as currently controversial moral views. In order to make the case that these views are justified, I will have to argue that I can find reasons to think a large majority of my peers and superiors agree with me, which means finding more reason to suspect error in most of those who disagree with us than in our-

sition to claim that most opponents of slavery *at the time* were not significantly better informed on these subjects, but he ignores extremely important information available to us now that was not available to the majority of those with pro-slavery views. Finally, it is quite unclear that the majority of those who were at all factually informed about New World slavery thought it morally acceptable; slaves were often a majority of the population in areas where slavery was practiced, disapproval of slavery was somewhat common in areas without slavery, and it seems plausible that many people throughout the world who approved of slavery were extensively misinformed about the practice of slavery and the people enslaved.

selves (without likewise discrediting too many of those who agree with me). Can I make the claim that the vast majority of those who disagree are reasoning fallaciously, factually mistaken or biased?

I think there is a strong case for those claims. I think there are conceptual confusions that are extremely widespread, including the confusion between what one finds distasteful and what is wrong; the confusion between what is familiar and what is morally acceptable; conflation of ethics with religion or custom; various forms of is–ought confusion; bad teleological reasoning, especially where evolution is concerned; and so on. Furthermore, I think there is pertinent factual information that a great many people lack, including information about human sexuality, sex and gender. And I think a great many people throughout the world have a significant interest in the sexual status quo. While I doubt that these epistemic disadvantages account for all opposition to same-sex marriage and gender equality, I think it plausible that only a small portion of those who disagree with me on these issues are free of these disadvantages. I think that, once we screen out these disadvantages, those who agree with me are probably in the majority.

It is worth noting an important strategic point here: My case does not require that *most of those who agree with me* are epistemically superior to most of those who disagree with me. It is quite likely that a substantial majority of those who *agree* with me are also conceptually confused, factually misinformed or biased. To answer McGrath, I need instead to make the case that *most of those who are epistemically advantaged* agree with me. If only a small sliver of the population avoids a given epistemic disadvantage, then we will be looking at what opinion predominates in that small sliver.

McGrath (2011) claims that it is not enough to show that a vast majority of my peers and superiors agree with me:

Notice that it is not enough that one is in a position to dismiss *some* or even *many* of those who hold a different opinion on such grounds, for it is enough to render one's belief CONTROVERSIAL if it is denied by even one other person of whom it is true that: you have no more reason to think that he or she is in error than that you are (240).

But this seems to contradict⁹ the argument in McGrath (2008) that her argument would not commit us to general skepticism:

[T]he beliefs that *the earth is older than one second* and that *there is an external world* are not CONTROVERSIAL. Even if these beliefs have on occasion been denied by some, including some of formidable intelligence (etc.), it does not follow that one has no more reason to suspect error in such minds than in one's own. Plausibly,

⁹ To be precise, the two statements are not strictly contradictory, but they can be made consistent only if we suppose that the person mentioned in (2011) to have such a high degree of expertise that we *end up* having no more reason to suspect error on her part *even after* we have taken into account facts about the distribution of opinion. The context gives no support for interpreting the (2011) passage this way.

one does have such reasons, reasons provided by facts about the distribution of opinion among the relevant class of people (95).

I take McGrath's (2008) position to be more credible than her (2011) position, because it squares better with more explicitly worked-out versions of the EWV (cf. Elga 2007), as well as the fact that her (2011) position seems to ignore her own (2008) argument that unpopularity is itself a reason to suspect error.

But I do not want to rest my case here. What I have said so far is right only if McGrath has missed some fairly obvious exceptions to P1. For the sake of argument, I will assume that McGrath is right that current controversies like marriage equality and gender equality cannot be explained as simply the result of confused arguments and biases due to personal interests. So if I want to claim any other epistemic advantages, I will need to make the case that McGrath *should* admit them, even though she has not so far.

5. Controversial Epistemological Views

In fact, there are lots of epistemic advantages I can claim. Here are three:

[1] I have studied ethics extensively. Most people who have studied ethics extensively agree with me about marriage equality and gender equality.

[2] I live in a city where I encounter plenty of non-straight people, in a state that legally recognizes gay marriage. And I am familiar with many women who are both happy and capable in traditionally male roles. This sort of familiarity with those most affected by marriage equality and gender equality, and with the effects of marriage equality and (something approaching) gender equality, gives me an epistemic advantage. Most of those who share these advantages agree with me.

[3] I have heard moving sermons at Unitarian Universalist church services about marriage equality and gender equality. Most of those who have heard such services at such churches agree with me.

An obvious problem exists with [1]-[3], though. My opponents actively *disagree* with me that [1]-[3] are epistemic advantages, and think these things make my judgment *worse*.

This is most obvious with [3]. I might want to claim it as an epistemic advantage, but my opponents will think it is downright harmful to my judgment; they are apt to think I was indoctrinated to have false beliefs by a false religion. I think the same of many of them, but that leaves us at an impasse.

[2] is a little stronger; it appeals to a criterion (familiarity) that I think improves my judgment. My opponents cannot simply say that living in the city is worse, or no better, than living elsewhere; they must explain why familiarity with non-straight people and empowered women does not improve my judgment (when it does improve my judgment in other circumstances).

But they are ready to explain it as a matter of being corrupted by peer pressure, or something of the sort.

[1] might seem like the strongest leg to stand on. My familiarity with the arguments for and against my positions might seem to make me well qualified to decide which position makes more sense. But McGrath resists this argument:

[W]hile one might think that good moral training would consist in taking a series of ethics courses devoted to the critical examination of arguments on both sides of divisive issues, an equally plausible answer might be that good moral training consists in being raised by virtuous people who devote relatively little time to scrutinizing arguments for and against their views (2008: 98).

Those who think (secular) ethicists are *less* likely to find the truth, despite working hard at considering evidence, are likely to appeal to an idea something along these lines.

So, it is controversial whether [1]-[3] are epistemic advantages at all. But is it also CONTROVERSIAL? I still bear the burden of proof to show that any of my controversial *moral* views is not CONTROVERSIAL. But [1]-[3] are not moral views. They are epistemological views about what makes someone a more credible moral judge. So perhaps I can claim the following:

[E] I have studied epistemology extensively. Most people who have studied epistemology extensively agree with me that [1] and [2] constitute epistemic advantages.

(Note that I have left out [3]. It is not my considered epistemological opinion that stirring sermons are a good source of added credibility, even if I happen to think those sermons are correct.)

Does McGrath's rebuttal to [1] succeed against [E] as well? It is not so obvious. As I have found repeatedly when I tell non-philosophers what I do, pretty much everyone has heard of ethics and has an ethical view, whereas many people have never heard of epistemology. While they certainly have some views about what is reasonable, and what constitutes good evidence, they tend not to categorize their epistemological views the way they categorize their ethical views. And, partly as a result, they are less likely to disagree with me that studying epistemology makes me more qualified to make judgments about epistemology.

[E] seems plausible to me, and it would garner further support for my side. But I cannot say that I am at all sure that [E] is true. In particular, I am not sure that a majority of epistemologists would agree that studying ethics adds credibility to one's ethical judgments. And then parts of McGrath's rebuttal still succeed. It is not clear that professional epistemologists are any less prone to persistent disagreement than professional ethicists, and we have no independent check we can use to verify what is reasonable, any more than we have to verify what is right. So I will not rest my case on [E], [1] and [2].

Still, bringing epistemological questions into focus still might help us make progress. The very fact that epistemology is a more obscure subject matter increases the chances that many people in public debates have not considered some epistemological questions. I will propose that we can invoke an epistemic advantage in a moral debate if we can meet the following conditions:

1. It is *uncontroversial*, in the sense that most people who have an opinion on the matter at all agree that it is an epistemic advantage.
2. It is *hard to reject*, in the sense that even those whom we accuse of lacking the epistemic advantage would probably have to admit that it is an epistemic advantage if they thought about it.
3. We can give an *error theory* to plausibly explain why those who disagree with us have not previously noticed that they are at an epistemic disadvantage.

I think those of us who favor marriage equality and gender equality can claim a few advantages that meet these conditions – or rather, we can claim that we are less likely to suffer certain disadvantages than our opponents.

First, a person can claim a certain sort of epistemic advantage if her opponents are dogmatic in the sense that they are unwilling to seriously consider the possibility that their disputed views are mistaken (and she herself is not dogmatic). Our opponents might claim that too much thinking about morality makes our moral judgment worse. But even if this is true, there is a basic problem with being dogmatic: If I refuse to seriously consider alternative views, I make it almost certain that *if* my views are wrong, they will not be corrected. And, if there is widespread disagreement about the view in question, I must admit that dogmatism, if widely practiced, would ensure that a great many people remain mistaken. (This is an argument that I think is uncontroversial among those who consider it.) So, while there is room for legitimate disagreement about how best to correct a mistaken view, there is at least something to be said for views that can survive comparison with alternatives. Even if it is true that *too much* thinking about morality makes our judgment worse, the fact that unreflective judgments around the world vary so widely shows that *unreflective* judgment is not trustworthy, so it is unreasonable to think that the optimal amount of critical thought about morality is none at all.

It is, of course, possible that, in fact, more people would have the correct moral beliefs if everyone was dogmatic. And it is likely that being non-dogmatic would lead at least a few people to have fewer true moral beliefs and more false moral beliefs. Thus, certain kinds of externalism – veritism and some kinds of reliabilism for instance – might imply that dogmatism is not an epistemic fault, at least for some people at some times. But since, as McGrath points out, we have no independent check on the accuracy of moral beliefs, we cannot, from our own points of view, appeal to such externalist standards of epistemic advantage and fault. While a dogmatist might, in fact, be correct, while I am in error, the fact that dogmatists insulate their errors

from correction means that I have, all else being equal, more reason to suspect dogmatists of error than those who are open to at least the possibility of correction.

I suspect that a large proportion of those with sexist and heterosexist moral views are dogmatic – many cite religious reasons for their views, and believe it would be wrong to doubt the truth of their faith. (This is my error theory.) And yet, most people recognize that dogmatism makes their opponents less likely to see the truth¹⁰ (and this is a reason to think that most people would accept the argument if they thought carefully about it). Of course, some opponents of sexism and heterosexism are also dogmatic. But it seems likely to me that a majority of non-dogmatic ethical views oppose sexism and heterosexism.

Second, almost all of us believe that moral progress has happened at some point in history, and that whatever reforms we consider progress were resisted for a generation or more. This, along with some historical evidence about scientific revolutions (cf. Kuhn 1996), suggests that most people resist new ideas in favor of old ones; there is some sort of status quo bias in ethics. When someone resists new ideas in favor of traditional views, then, the fact that status quo bias is common gives us a reason to suspect error. (I think this argument is uncontroversial among those who consider it.)

This point about status quo bias only gives us *more* reason to suspect error in defenders of the status quo if there is not an equally uncontroversial source of error among challengers of the status quo. However, history does not seem to suggest that there is a widespread bias toward novel moral beliefs – most people throughout most of history seem reluctant to change their moral beliefs. Obviously most challenges to traditional moral views must be mistaken, because most challenges to the status quo are contradicted by other challenges to the status quo – but then, most traditional moralities are contradicted by other traditional moralities, so the poor track record of challenges to tradition does not show that novelty is any more likely to be a source of error than traditional acceptance. (It may only show that morality is hard to get right.)

It probably is right to say that there have been many moral “fads” throughout history – moral ideas that catch on for a generation or so, and

¹⁰ I state this as an obvious truth when we consider our *opponents*. Do we think the same about those who agree with us? Most philosophers – and, I think, most ordinary people – recognize that refusal to consider the possibility of error makes our dogmatically held views less *justified*, even if they are, in fact, true. It is possible that G. E. Moore-style exceptions exist, though I have not yet found one that would defend dogmatism in this sort of ethical debate. James Pryor (2000) defends a form of dogmatism, but it is distinctly more modest than what I am calling “dogmatism” here. Thomas Kelly (2005 and 2008) defends a Moore-style resistance to reconsidering certain views, but he argues generally that the Moorean line is *not* objectionably dogmatic, and that it only insulates commonsense views from criticism by certain sorts of philosophical arguments. And it is worth noting that Moore himself (1903, § 45) thought that we cannot reasonably feel certainty about moral views in the face of widespread disagreement.

then fade out. We cannot, of course, rule out altogether the possibility that one of these fads was correct – nor can we rule out the possibility that some now-extinct moral tradition was correct. But pretty much any modern moral person, by virtue of having moral views at all, is committed to saying that moral fads tend to be wrong, just as we are committed to saying that, at some point in the past, the vast majority resisted correct views. If someone has a very novel moral view, of course, they are not in a position to know whether their view is a moral fad; after all, it has not yet disappeared after a generation or so. Still, perhaps the fact that history is littered with moral fads means we should suspect novel moral views of faddish error until they have stood the test of a few generations. In any case, marriage equality and gender equality seem to be past the point where they can be dismissed as mere fads. I, at least, cannot see a reason to suspect these challenges to traditional morality of error, comparable to the reason status quo bias gives me to suspect traditional morality of error. (Or rather, most such sources of error I could imagine were bracketed off when I supposed, for the sake of argument, that disagreements over marriage equality and gender equality are not the result of bad arguments, factual confusion or self-interested biases.)

McGrath's point that we have no independent check on moral correctness would seriously undermine this argument, if there were some unified, traditional morality that a large proportion of the world accepted. But, in fact, most of the world must admit that there was a time when, by their own lights, people had worse moral values, and that prophets and revolutionaries had to struggle to win acceptance for new and better views; most would claim that resistance to the correct view persisted beyond when it was reasonable (which is why the argument is hard to reject). This is particularly good news for gender equality and marriage equality; there seems to have been a trend toward convergence on reformers' views in the past few generations, and resistance to change can help to explain continuing dissent. Of course, when people confront new and unwelcome moral views, they are likely not to think about the fact that their own views were once new and unpopular, and were resisted unreasonably. In fact, without a decent knowledge of history, they might be unaware that their own views were resisted as novel and immoral in the past. (So, here we have an error theory.)

Third, there are a wide range of intellectual errors that are hard to escape, or even spot, without specialized training, including cognitive biases, implicit prejudices, misunderstandings of statistics, predictive errors and uncharitable interpretations of positions. It seems to be widely accepted in the relevant fields that people are prone to confirmation bias, endowment effects, unconscious stereotyping, hasty generalization and the straw man fallacy, to give a few examples. Each of these problems could, in part, explain resistance to marriage equality and gender equality.¹¹ These failings could be

¹¹ Some quick sketches: One reason people offer for rejecting marriage equality and gender equality is that they will have bad overall effects, and confirmation bias can lead people to

epistemic disadvantages for either side of the debate. But those who have learned about these kinds of failings are more likely to be on guard against them, and those who have regular interactions with those who have such training are more likely to have their errors brought to their attention.¹² (This, I take it, is uncontroversial once considered, and hard to reject.) But one must usually have certain kinds of education, or be part of a community in which others have such education, to develop awareness of these sorts of errors and the skills involved in overcoming them. A large majority of those with these kinds of training favor marriage equality and gender equality.¹³ But those who neither have such training, nor much interaction with those who do, are not only likely to make these sorts of errors, but are also unlikely to recognize them as errors (and thus we have an error theory). And, indeed, arguments against marriage equality and gender equality often seem to involve problems like cherry-picked (or simply mistaken) statistics, hasty or stereotypical generalizations about non-straight people and/or women, misinterpretations or exaggerations of proposed reforms, etc.¹⁴

notice only those effects that confirm their suspicions. Social changes are likely to involve both positive and negative changes, and endowment effects make people likely to give extra weight to negative changes. Unconscious stereotyping may lead to, for instance, unduly negative views about the results of gay marriage (the expectation that gay men, for instance, will be frivolous and unfaithful, and reduce public expectations for marriage) or women's increasing equality (the expectation that women will be inept or timid in traditionally male roles) or may lead to underestimating the value of change (for instance, thinking, on the basis of stereotypes, that few gay people want to get married, or few women want to occupy traditionally male roles). The straw man fallacy may lead to misunderstanding and dismissal of proposals for reform (e.g., thinking that proponents of marriage equality will insist that all churches perform gay marriages, or that proponents of gender equality think there are no biological differences between females and males).

¹² Cf. Kahnemann 2011:

[It] is much easier, as well as far more enjoyable, to identify and label the mistakes of others than to recognize our own. Questioning what we believe and want is difficult at the best of times, and especially difficult when we most need to do it, but we can benefit from the informed opinions of others. Many of us spontaneously anticipate how friends and colleagues will evaluate our choices; the quality and content of these anticipated judgments therefore matters. The anticipation of intelligent gossip is a powerful motive for serious self-criticism ... (3).

¹³ At least this is my impression. One reviewer questions this claim, suggesting that most of those throughout history who had such training probably opposed marriage equality and gender equality. It seems to me that a great deal of important work on cognitive bias and implicit bias, especially, is quite new, so I am not at all sure that educated populations throughout history can be presumed to be epistemic peers of those at the current cutting edge. If I am wrong, perhaps I cannot claim this kind of advantage for my side.

¹⁴ One reviewer reported finding it highly implausible that the sorts of cognitive errors I mention, or the absence thereof, play any role in public acceptance or rejection of marriage equality or gender equality. The reviewer's argument is that the sorts of fallacious arguments I mention are usually offered post hoc, and are not the reason people oppose marriage equality or gender equality in the first place. I think this is probably right, as far as it goes,

Notice also that marriage equality and gender equality seem to be counterexamples to McGrath's argument that ethicists' philosophical reflections have not produced convergence on controversial matters; Wollstonecraft and Bentham laid out some basic arguments for equal treatment of women and acceptance of homosexuality more than 200 years ago, and gradually their basic arguments, with some adjustments and augmentation, have won over the bulk of the philosophical community, and continue winning over society at large.

I do not mean to say, of course, that all philosophers agree with me. John Finnis, for instance, remains a staunch opponent of marriage equality. I am not in a position to claim that Finnis is dogmatic, prone to status-quo bias, or more prone to other sorts of intellectual errors than I am. Nor am I in a position to claim that most of those who agree with me avoid the epistemic disadvantages mentioned above or that all those who disagree with me suffer from them. But I think it is the case that *among* those who are non-dogmatic, aware of the history of their beliefs and well informed about intellectual errors, those like Finnis constitute a small minority.

It is possible I am mistaken about any number of points here. Perhaps proponents of marriage equality and gender equality are no less prone to these shortcomings than their opponents. Or perhaps I am wrong to think that these claims about epistemic shortcomings are uncontroversial and hard to resist. But even if that is the case, I hope to have shown that this general strategy is promising: A controversial moral view can be defensible if we can identify epistemic advantages that we can plausibly suppose our opponents have missed. If so, we might find other reasons to think that we enjoy an epistemic advantage.

6. When Can We Suppose We Have an Epistemic Advantage?

I have offered a number of reasons to think that most of those who oppose marriage equality and gender equality are likely to suffer from some epistemic disadvantages that many of us who favor such equality do not suffer (at least not on the same topic). You have doubtless noticed that I have provided no hard evidence. And I have none. Some of my claims would be very difficult to verify, and I do not know of empirical studies confirming (or disconfirming) any of them. Rather, they are claims that I think are likely to be right, based on what I have heard and read about the debates over these sorts of equality.

You have probably also noticed that I have only provided half an argument for rejecting the Moral Peer View on these issues: I have accused my

but it does not show that fallacious reason has no explanatory role to play in the explanation of most opposition to my views. A post-hoc argument may not be the source of, say, opposition to gay marriage, but it may prevent reconsideration of the view, or lead the opponent of gay marriage to think its proponents ignorant or foolish.

opponents of suffering from disadvantages, but I have not shown that I suffer no similar disadvantages. Naturally, I suffer from some cognitive defects, and I freely admit to having some of the same defects as my opponents. But my argument collapses if I (and most of my peers and superiors who agree with me) have defects my opponents lack, which are as bad as their defects (or worse). Why suppose I lack such defects? My major reason is that I have failed to notice any. This, you will say, is weak tea; my opponents probably have not noticed the cognitive defects I accuse them of, so how can my own failure to notice defects on my own part be evidence of an advantage on my part?

My position with regard to my opponents is one of asymmetrical evidence, which is not necessarily evidence of asymmetry. I have more evidence of their epistemic disadvantages than I have of my own – but my lacking evidence of my own disadvantages does not show that I do not have them. Still, when it comes to justifying negative beliefs, lack of evidence might be the best we can do. I have no evidence of the nonexistence of stealthy unicorns, except that I have no evidence *of* such creatures. Like cognitive defects, stealthy magical beasts are the sort of things that, by their nature, would be hard to detect, so failure to detect them is not very strong evidence. Probably the best I can say for now is that I have failed to notice serious cognitive defects on my part, even though I have tried to think about whether I suffer some (whereas I have never for a moment tried to detect stealthy unicorns).

What does the EWV say about situations like this? We must seriously reduce our confidence when we face a certain kind of *symmetry* in our disagreements; we cannot remain confident while having no reason to think we have an epistemic advantage. But that situation shifts as soon as we come up with a plausible reason to think that we *do* have an epistemic advantage. It cannot be a question-begging reason – I cannot think that you are more likely than I to be mistaken just because I think that you are wrong on the issue we disagree about – but that is about the only in-principle restriction. The EWV is silent about what to think when I am not sure we are epistemic peers,¹⁵ so I propose we take the following approach: If I think I have figured out why we disagree, and my explanation involves an error on your part, then I have some reason to trust my judgment more than yours, at least for the time being. This approach will let me become more confident about my own view, once I have done the work of coming up with a plausible (and non-question-begging) hypothesis about why I am right.

What good is it if I find new ways to rationalize my old, controversial view? For one thing, I can only use my new rationale as a defense so long as I have good reason to think my opponents do not have a symmetrical ra-

¹⁵ The canonical statements of the EWV come from Feldman 2006, Christensen 2007 and Elga 2007. But these three articles seem to take very different approaches to the question of how we should react to disagreement with someone who might or might not be a peer. The approach I suggest is closest to Christensen 2007.

tionale. Thus, if I want to hold onto my moral views – and I usually do – I have to identify asymmetries between disagreeing parties. Moreover, whatever asymmetry I think might explain the disagreement (as being a mistake on the other side) suggests a way I might try to produce agreement in the future. If I think differences in information or identifiable biases are the cause of the disagreement, then I could try to produce greater agreement by trying to make the other side better informed or less biased.

Finally, I cannot reasonably regard my rationale as anything more than a hypothesis standing in need of confirmation. Before testing my hypotheses, I probably should not be as confident in my moral views as I would be if there was no major disagreement. That, in itself, might be a good thing. Let us consider a new example. I sometimes wonder whether opponents of physician assisted suicide (PAS) are people who are uncomfortable with the idea of making a decision to die, in part because they are uncomfortable confronting the inevitability of their own death. If this was right, we would expect those who do have to confront their own mortality to be more likely to approve of PAS, all else equal. We might also expect that the prospect would become less alarming if PAS were to become common. In this case, I might vote to legalize PAS in Massachusetts, on the grounds that legalization in a few states gives us the opportunity to see whether attitudes shift as a result (the way they seem to have done with gay marriage). But I should be much less certain about a constitutional amendment guaranteeing any terminally ill patient in the U.S. a right to PAS – given the widespread opposition to PAS, I should take seriously the possibility that legalizing PAS might be a bad thing after all.¹⁶

By the same token, those who think I am wrong would need to come up with hypotheses about what has gone wrong with *my* judgment. Perhaps their hypotheses will be confirmed, and, when certain sources of error have been removed, I will find my own views changing. This is an uncomfortable thought, of course, but one to be welcomed on moral and epistemic grounds. It is also possible that we will run into intractable disagreements about epistemic standards: What I think is a bias others will think is a virtue, and vice versa. If we can make no headway, we may ultimately remain in a benighted condition. But, again, we can always hope to find some new idea to explain how some people are mistaken, and bring about new convergence.

This sort of approach to moral disagreement encourages cautious experiments in living and discourse, which, all things considered, seem fairly reasonable. It is fairly plausible to say that we should be less confident of our controversial moral views when so many credible people disagree with us, so long as we have some reasonable hope for improving our epistemic state in the future. It also reminds us that progress in morality and epistemology

¹⁶ My willingness to take such risks will also depend on how *great* I think my epistemic advantages are. If I think my epistemic advantages over those who disagree with me are very slight, I should accordingly weigh the likelihood that I am wrong more heavily.

might take centuries, and will require insight about other people, and inventive new ideas.

But the alternative – supposing that we lack an epistemic advantage until we can demonstrate that we have such an advantage – does not have any greater theoretical support. It involves an inference from ignorance: We suppose we are equal not because we have decisive evidence of equality, but because we do not have decisive evidence that we are unequal. In fact, in the cases I have proposed, this would be worse than an argument from ignorance; it would involve inferring equality in spite of having evidence of defects on one side, and (weak) evidence of a lack of defects on the other side. And it sets the bar so high for justifying a position that it would make ethical debate fairly fruitless; we could not become confident of our beliefs unless we could offer arguments in their favor and offer arguments that there were no countervailing arguments, thus leaving us in a state of indecision until we could prove a negative. Of course, the MPV does allow us to be confident of views that most people accept. If, as seems likely, we could popularize an ethical view more quickly through propaganda than through careful argument, the MPV then commits us to accepting that propaganda is more likely to reveal the right answer than reasoned argument, at least where ethics is concerned. But I would hope that we have background theoretical reasons to reject any theory that leads to that result.

7. Conclusion

The EWW generally demands that we take into account the evidence at our disposal provided by other people's beliefs, and McGrath's version is no exception. She insists that we cannot ignore evidence about other people's credibility relative to our own. But often we lack information about their relative credibility, and this is especially common in ethics. McGrath proposes that, at least in our present circumstances, we should suppose that everyone is our moral peer. But her argument seems to rely on the claim that no one, at present, can claim an epistemic advantage the way abolitionists could when pointing out that (some of) their opponents had financial interests that undermined their credibility. I hope to have defended the claim that there are several such advantages that support marriage equality and gender equality. And, while these particular arguments might be challenged, I have offered a theoretical framework for justifying confidence in moral beliefs, in spite of the fact that we have no independent check on the accuracy of such beliefs.¹⁷

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