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CONCILIATIONISM AND MORAL SPINELESSNESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a challenge to conciliationist views of disagreement. I argue that conciliationists cannot satisfactorily explain why we need not revise our beliefs in response to certain moral disagreements. Conciliationists can attempt to meet this challenge in one of two ways. First, they can individuate disputes narrowly. This allows them to argue that we have dispute-independent reason to distrust our opponents' moral judgment. This approach threatens to license objectionable dogmatism. It also inappropriately gives deep epistemic significance to superficial questions about how to think about the subject matter of a dispute. Second, conciliationists can individuate disputes widely. This allows them to argue that we lack dispute-independent reason to trust our opponents' moral judgment. But such arguments fail; our background of generally shared moral beliefs gives us good reason to trust the moral judgment of our opponents, even after we set quite a bit of our reasoning aside. On either approach, then, conciliationists should acknowledge that we have dispute-independent reason to trust the judgment of those who reject our moral beliefs. Given a conciliationist view of disagreement's epistemic role, this has the unattractive result that we are epistemically required to revise some of our most intuitively secure moral beliefs.

This paper presents a challenge to conciliationism, a family of views about the epistemically rational response to disagreement. The characteristic claim of conciliationist views is that, in the face of disagreement with an epistemic peer about whether p, one must revise one's confidence in p. More generally, conciliationist views claim that certain sorts of disagreement rationally require us to revise or abandon contested beliefs.

It's easy to worry about the implications of conciliationism. Intuitively, we are entitled to confidently retain some of our beliefs in the face of disagreement. If a conciliationist view counsels us to give up our confidence in apparently obvious truths of logic, for example, that view will be at best revisionary and at worst impossible to follow. Similarly, certain moral commitments seem like worrisome cases for conciliationism. I am convinced that homosexual behavior between adults is *pro tanto* permissible; does disagreement require me to abandon this judgment? Common sense says no. In the face of examples like these, conciliationists often take pains to show that their views do not counsel intuitively implausible belief revision.[1] In the cases where steadfast belief seems clearly appropriate, they argue, conciliationism does not recommend changes in confidence. To

1 On my usage, to *revise* a belief is to either abandon it or lower one's credence in it.

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successfully argue for this conclusion would be to solve conciliationism's "problem of spinelessness" (Elga 2007: 494).

This paper argues that, when it comes to moral beliefs, conciliationism cannot satisfactorily solve the problem of spinelessness.[2] Conciliationists must either individuate disputes narrowly or widely. On either approach, conciliationists cannot offer a principled and satisfying vindication of our intuitively appropriate confidence in the face of moral disagreement.

1. CONCILIATIONISM AND SPINELESSNESS

The characteristic claim of conciliationist views is the claim that, when one disagrees with an apparent epistemic peer as to whether *p*, one rationally ought to revise one's belief as to whether *p*. But conciliationists are not solely concerned to defend this conclusion about the (possibly quite rare[3]) case of disagreement between apparent peers. Rather, they seek to explain this result by defending more general accounts of the epistemic role played by disagreement. In the course of doing so, conciliationists appeal to the following principle:

> *Independence* When considering how much epistemic weight to give your beliefs, in order to determine how (or whether) to revise my own belief, I must assess your epistemic credentials in a way that relies only on *dispute-independent* reasoning.[4]

Just what does it mean for reasoning to be *dispute-independent*? This is a crucial question for conciliationists, and a good deal of this paper will be concerned with candidate answers.[5] But for now, we can leave the answer to the question at a rough, intuitive level: reasoning is dispute-independent if it is not both challenged by one's interlocutor and relevant to the topic at hand.

By forbidding me from appealing to some disputed reasoning, Independence restricts the epistemically legitimate ways in which I can conclude that my opponent is untrustworthy. *Prima facie*, this seems to require me to take certain opponents quite seriously. It may even require me to lose confidence in cases where, intuitively, I am fully entitled to retain my disputed beliefs. This is what Adam Elga memorably calls "the problem of spinelessness" (Elga 2007: 494). Conciliationists usually deny that their views entail spinelessness. They do so by arguing that Independence does not require implausible belief revision.

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2 For the purpose of this debate, I'll assume that moral judgments are beliefs. But it's worth noting that some noncognitivists may be able to neatly avoid the worries raised here; they can simultaneously accept conciliationism about beliefs and reject the conclusion that there are any epistemic requirements on moral judgments. See especially Kalderon (2005).

3 Audi (2008), Lackey (2010a), and King (2012), among others, argue for the rarity of peer disagreement.

4 Cf. Elga (2007: 490–1) and Christensen (2011: 1–2). Certain conciliationists and anti-conciliationists alike have apparently accepted that the debate over conciliationism comes down to a debate over Independence (see Christensen 2011; Kelly 2013). Even Errol Lord, who raises worries about this characterization, acknowledges that there may be no defenses of conciliationism that are not connected to acceptance of Independence (Lord 2014).

5 For further discussion, see especially Christensen (2011: 18).

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As a first step in addressing the problem of spinelessness, conciliationists distinguish between the two following principles. I'll follow Katia Vavova in labelling the first one NIRP (the No Independent Reason Principle) and the second one GIRP (the Good Independent Reason Principle).

> *NIRP* Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation fails to give me good reason to be confident that I am more trustworthy than my interlocutor, I must revise my belief in the direction of hers.

> *GIRP* Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation gives me good reason to be confident that my interlocutor is at least as trustworthy as I am, I must revise my belief in the direction of hers.[6]

In these principles, and throughout the paper, I use 'trustworthy' as a theory-neutral term for *having the epistemic credentials that conciliationists ask us to look for in others*. Different conciliationists emphasize different epistemic credentials. According to Vavova (2014: 317) and Christensen (2011: 15), the right sort of dispute-independent evaluation aims at determining whether an interlocutor is *well-informed* and *likely to have reasoned correctly from her evidence*. Elga (2007: 490), on the other hand, calls attention to the (dispute-independent) probability that an interlocutor is correct.[7] This paper's argument applies to both types of conciliationism; on both, we have some dispute-independent reason to take our opponents in certain moral debates to be at least as trustworthy as we are.

Conciliationists usually reject NIRP precisely because it would lead to epistemic spinelessness.[8] Consider a disagreement with an anti-realist about the external world. She disputes every one of my beliefs about the external world, and so for any proposition p in that domain, I lack any undisputed reason to think that I am more trustworthy about p than the anti-realist is. If NIRP is right, this means that I should revise my belief in the direction of the anti-realist's. This is an unwelcome result: conciliationists usually do not consider our beliefs so fragile.

GIRP does not obviously have such counterintuitive results. It only requires me to revise my belief in two sorts of cases: cases in which I have positive reason to take my interlocutor to be trustworthy, and cases in which the disagreement reveals that I myself am not very trustworthy. GIRP explains why a disagreement with a friend is usually more worrisome than a disagreement with an anti-realist stranger. I have plenty of reasons to trust my friends' judgment; I have no reason to trust the anti-realist's. By accepting GIRP instead of NIRP, a conciliationist begins to address the charge of spinelessness.

But a crucial question remains: do I have good dispute-independent reason to think that those who actually reject my beliefs are at least as trustworthy as I am? According to GIRP, whenever this condition obtains, disagreement requires me to revise my belief – no matter how justified or dearly held.

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6 These formulations are adapted from Christensen (2011: 15).

7 Christensen (2014) discusses implications of focusing (as Elga does) on interlocutors' apparent accuracy rather than their apparent rationality.

8 See Christensen (2011: 15–16) and Vavova (2014: 314–15). But contrast Sidgwick (1981: 342), Feldman (2006), and King (2012: 267–9).

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The prospect of spinelessness seems particularly likely to arise, and particularly troubling, in the moral domain. Certain moral beliefs are both very intuitively secure and deeply controversial. For this reason, several conciliationists attempt to explain why their theories do not recommend spinelessness about moral belief in particular. They treat this conclusion as one of the desiderata for a successful account of disagreement's epistemic role.

This paper will argue that conciliationism cannot achieve this desideratum. The success of any given conciliationist proposal depends on what it means to be *dispute-independent*. Conciliationists can approach this issue by individuating disputes narrowly or widely. But on either approach, conciliationism faces serious problems. The next section illustrates the problems for conciliationists who individuate disputes narrowly.

2. INDIVIDUATING DISPUTES NARROWLY

Adam Elga, in his seminal "Reflection and Disagreement," defends a version of conciliationism (his "equal weight view") against the charge of spinelessness. His defense is straightforward: in most real cases of serious disagreement, we lack good dispute-independent reason to trust our interlocutors' judgment. The reason is that, in most real cases of disagreement, "one's reasoning about the disputed issue is tangled up with one's reasoning about many other matters" (Elga 2007: 492).

Elga clarifies this point through an example. Ann and Beth are two "friends who stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum" (Elga 2007: 492–3) and disagree about the permissibility of abortion. Elga takes it for granted that a defensible conciliationism should not recommend that, in any such case, Ann revise her belief about the permissibility of abortion.

Elga's key point, in addressing this example, is the following: even after setting aside her disputed reasoning, Ann does not consider Beth trustworthy about abortion.[9] In fact, he goes further: even after setting aside her disputed reasoning, Ann will most likely expect Beth to be quite *un*trustworthy about abortion. This is precisely because Ann's reasoning about abortion is "tangled up" with other issues. Ann most likely disagrees with Beth, for instance, about issues like "whether humans have souls" (Elga 2007: 493) and "the age at which humans begin feeling pain" (Elga 2007: 496). Even after she sets aside the reasoning behind her belief about abortion's permissibility, Elga suggests, Ann need not set aside *these* beliefs. And by noting that Beth tends to be wrong about "allied issues" (Elga 2007: 493), Ann can reasonably infer that Beth is untrustworthy about abortion. Elga's conciliationism therefore does not require Ann to revise her contested belief.

Elga's proposal, in effect, is that we individuate disputes quite narrowly. He suggests that Ann only set aside the reasoning behind her belief that abortion is permissible, rather than setting aside the "cluster" (Elga 2007: 495) of related beliefs disputed by Beth. This helps Elga to avoid the problem of spinelessness. The more narrowly a dispute is individuated, the more beliefs and reasoning are independent of that dispute. By individuating disputes narrowly, then, Elga allows me to appeal to closely related beliefs when I assess my opponents' epistemic credentials. Some of these related beliefs will likely imply that she is frequently mistaken. Far from being spineless, I will often be permitted to confidently

9 Contrast Enoch (2010: 971–2) and Setiya (2013: 16–17).

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retain my initial belief. After all, it is only challenged by someone who, on my evidence, is less trustworthy than I am.

Though it certainly seems to prevent spinelessness, individuating disputes narrowly creates problems of its own. First, it threatens to insulate too many beliefs from epistemic defeat. According to Elga, most real-world disputes are messy and complicated; they are usually structurally similar to the case of Ann and Beth (Elga 2007: 493). This means that, to the extent that Ann is epistemically permitted to steadfastly remain confident in the face of Beth's disagreement, we may be able to steadfastly remain confident *whenever* we engage in a messy, real-world dispute. This ability to blamelessly shrug off different approaches to complex issues seems, at first glance, just as problematic as a frequent call for spinelessness. Even non-conciliationists should grant that a disagreement's being connected to several "allied issues" is insufficient to render it epistemically irrelevant.[10]

A second problem is even more serious: there is no principled way to individuate all disputes with a uniform fineness of grain. Just how wide is the scope of any given real-world dispute? Elga's only guidance on this matter is the following: we should individuate disputes "just coarsely enough so that [your judgment about your interlocutor's trustworthiness] is genuinely prior to your reasoning about the disputed issue" (Elga 2007: 490). But this just pushes the problem back: how narrowly should we construe *the disputed issue*?

Quite a lot may hang on the answer to this question. Say that we are both baseball fans, but we disagree about the current standings in the American League East. I think that the Orioles are at the top, the Yankees are somewhere in the middle, and the Red Sox are at the bottom of the division. (Suppose, further, that I have not relied on any of these beliefs in reasoning about the others.) You think that the Red Sox are at the top, the Orioles are somewhere in the middle, and the Yankees are at the bottom. What is the disputed issue in this case? Are we engaged in three distinct disputes, one over the place of each team? Or are we engaged in a single dispute over the state of the division?

Conciliationists who aspire to individuate disputes narrowly cannot afford to leave this question unresolved or to say that we are engaged in both. In certain evidential situations, the two construals yield contradictory verdicts about where I should move my credences. It may be that, if we understand this case to involve three distinct disputed issues, your apparently mistaken beliefs about the Red Sox and Yankees provide me with dispute-independent reason to think that you will be wrong about the Orioles. I could, in other words, appeal to "allied issues" to write you off as untrustworthy about the Orioles. If we understand the case as a dispute over a single issue, on the other hand, I will not be able to appeal to beliefs about the Red Sox and Yankees; my beliefs about the Red Sox and Yankees are *not* independent of my reasoning about *the state of the division*. And with those beliefs set aside, I will have fewer admissible reasons to take you to be untrustworthy. It might even be that this dispute-independent evaluation, on balance, suggests that you are quite trustworthy. I might therefore be required to revise *all* my beliefs about the state of the division – including the standings of individual teams.

So the question of how to respond to a dispute may be decided in two contradictory ways depending on the way we individuate disputes. But in the baseball case, just as in

10 For a thorough discussion of this problem, see Lackey (2010b).

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the case of Ann and Beth, there does not seem to be any deep truth of the matter as to whether we are disagreeing about many small issues or one big issue. This is a serious problem for any conciliationism, like Elga's, that individuates disputes narrowly. Such approaches give enormous epistemic importance to a superficial question: what is the number of disputed issues involved in a given case of disagreement? This question seems both epistemically irrelevant and difficult to answer in a principled way.

There is an obvious and attractive way for the conciliationist to avoid this problem: she can individuate disputes more widely. She can, that is, require us to set aside the entire "cluster" of relevant disputed beliefs when we assess an opponent's epistemic credentials. The conciliationist who takes this approach need not rely on an *ad hoc* approach to counting disputes; indeed, she need not attempt to count disputes at all. Rather, she can simply require disputants to set aside *all* beliefs that are both contested and potentially dialectically relevant. In the next section, we'll see how conciliationists have resisted the charge of spinelessness by individuating disputes in this wide-open way.

3. INDIVIDUATING DISPUTES WIDELY

Katia Vavova (2014) has recently argued that, when we individuate disputes widely, conciliationism does not require spinelessness.[11] In fact, she thinks that this sort of conciliationism has attractive results: most importantly, it implies that disagreement is not an epistemic threat to our most intuitively secure moral beliefs. Where her conciliationism *does* require revision of moral beliefs, Vavova argues, those revisions are independently well-motivated (2014: 325).

Vavova's approach to the problem of moral spinelessness involves several complementary observations about moral thought and practice. First, she notes that there is negligibly little actual disagreement about certain moral beliefs. Even if disagreement is a *prima facie* threat to some moral beliefs, it is surely no threat to the belief that pain is bad or the belief that we should not kick puppies (2014: 326). There is simply not enough actual disagreement about these subjects to present a problem. Second, Vavova notes that some "apparent moral disagreements aren't really disagreements about moral matters" (2014: 313).[12] Two people might agree about whether graffiti artists should be imprisoned, for instance, while disagreeing about whether Jones should therefore be imprisoned. Their disagreement would come down to a disagreement about an empirical matter: whether Jones is

11 Elga also argues, in much the same way that Vavova does, that even when we individuate disputes widely, conciliationism does not require spinelessness (Elga 2007: 496–7; cf. Vavova 2014: 315 n35). But since Vavova argues for the claim at further length, and explicitly draws conclusions for moral epistemology, this paper will treat her as the standard-bearer for the "wide approach."

12 Some may want to take this point further than Vavova. Perhaps all apparently moral disagreement comes down to disagreement about non-moral facts. This suggests another strategy for the conciliationist: argue that there is no truly moral disagreement at all, and that we therefore never need revise our moral beliefs. But the conciliationist should not be too hopeful about this strategy; it relies on a risky empirical bet about what people actually believe. A responsible conciliationist should not be sure, absent some impressive psychological surveys, that (for instance) all parties to the dispute about homosexual behavior are simply applying the same fundamental moral commitments about sexual behavior to sexual encounters that they understand differently.

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a graffiti artist. Conciliating in these cases would not amount to spinelessness about our deepest moral commitments.[13] If conciliationism requires objectionable spinelessness about our moral commitments, then, it will only be in a restricted class of disagreements: fairly robust controversies that "aren't, at root, non-moral" (Vavova 2014: 324).

Even in these crucial cases, Vavova insists, disagreement does not have much defeating power. Her wide individuation of disputes helps to explain why. When my interlocutor has a dramatically different moral worldview, our disagreements will not be restricted to only a few topics; they will arise in clusters of related beliefs. On a wide individuation of disputes, this means that fewer of my beliefs will be truly dispute-independent. Now, according to GIRP, a disagreement cannot have defeating power unless it leaves me with dispute-independent reason to trust my interlocutor. So the more I set aside, the less a disagreement can call for belief revision. This, Vavova argues, is appropriate: the disagreement of a reasonable political opponent should be more epistemically worrisome than the disagreement of a sociopath Vavova (2014: 314–15). A wide individuation of disputes can explain why.

Vavova appears to offer a tidy solution to the problem of spinelessness. When we disagree with people who share our "basic worldview" Vavova (2014: 324), our disagreement takes place against a robust backdrop of shared moral beliefs. This means that we have plenty of dispute-independent reason to trust our opponents. Conciliationism sometimes calls on us to lose confidence in these cases, but this is not intuitively implausible Vavova (2014: 322). We do *not*, on the other hand, have good dispute-independent reason to trust people whose moral judgments differ from ours systematically. These disagreements ask us to set aside too much; they "go too deep" Vavova (2014: 323) to have defeating power.

4. A PROBLEM FOR THE WIDE APPROACH

Promising though it may seem, a wide individuation of disputes cannot solve conciliationism's problem of spinelessness. The problem for this approach is that, even after setting aside large "clusters" of our moral thinking, we still have sufficient dispute-independent reason to trust the moral judgment of a great many people – even those who reject some of our most cherished moral beliefs. When there are enough such people, conciliationism counsels spinelessness.

This may seem like a preposterous claim. Recall the principle, called GIRP above, that explains how to use a dispute-independent evaluation:

> **GIRP** Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation gives me good reason to be confident that my interlocutor is at least as trustworthy as I am, I must revise my belief in the direction of hers.

Isn't this an extremely high standard? After all, I know plenty about my own epistemic credentials. I know far, far less about the credentials of the host of people who reject

13 There is an interesting question as to whether a conciliationism like Vavova's would require objectionable spinelessness about non-moral beliefs. But this question lies beyond the scope of this paper. For some promising first moves, see Decker and Groll (2013).

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my most treasured moral beliefs. Most of these people are total strangers. Wouldn't I need to know an enormous amount about of personal information about someone before I could have reason to be confident that he is at least as trustworthy as I am? And isn't the disagreement of strangers therefore epistemically irrelevant?

This line of thinking is misleading. Paradigmatic cases for conciliationism can help to show why. Say that you are at a racetrack, watching the end of a horse race. You watch horses A and B cross the finish line, and you form the belief that horse A narrowly won. Now, say that a total stranger beside you expresses the belief that horse B won. Intuitively, the disagreement of this stranger has some defeating power. Perhaps not very much; depending on the details, you may only be required to reduce your confidence a bit. But the notion that this person's disagreement just cannot rationalize a change in your credence level, merely because you know your own track-record so much better than his, is clearly mistaken.

How can the conciliationist explain this? First, she must interpret the phrase "reason to be confident that my interlocutor is at least as trustworthy as I am" somewhat loosely, such that you could have some dispute-independent reason to be confident that the stranger at the racetrack is just as perceptually trustworthy as you are.[14] Let's grant that such an interpretation can be offered.

A further question remains: what could give you this reason for trusting the stranger? Well, plausibly, you are warranted in making certain assumptions about strangers based on what you know people are generally like. In other words, justified beliefs about the base rates in a population can underwrite justified beliefs about the epistemic credentials of individuals in that population. We all have a history of interactions that justifies us, for instance, in thinking that the vast majority of people are fairly reliable when it comes to perceiving medium-sized objects. We have even better reason to think this of people that bother to go to racetracks. So even when your interlocutor at the racetrack is a total stranger, you still have *some* dispute-independent reason to expect that he is a reliable perceiver of the ends of horse races. The conciliationist should say that this provides some (dispute-independent) evidence that the average person at the racetrack is just as trustworthy about horse races as you are.

Of course, this line of thought only threatens *moral* spinelessness if we have dispute-independent reason to suspect that total strangers are, to some extent, likely to be just as trustworthy about morality as we are. But, plausibly, we do have such a reason: the enormous backdrop of moral beliefs that almost all people share. Vavova herself argues that, when it comes to most cases, people are in broad moral agreement. And this seems right. Although the practical importance of reaching moral consensus tends to draw our attention toward areas of dispute, most people probably share the vast majority of their moral beliefs. Nearly everyone agrees that pain is bad and that we shouldn't kick puppies. Nearly everyone agrees that we should generally keep our promises, that it is generally better to compliment someone than to stab her, that we are morally permitted to either start walking with the left foot or the right, and so on. The consensus extends to a huge subset of the moral propositions that we are capable of entertaining.

When we note that other people generally seem to be right about a wide range of moral questions, we gain reason to believe of any given stranger that he will be right about a

14 Christensen explicitly endorses this looser interpretation (2011: 16; cf. Christensen 2007: 212).

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wide range of moral questions. As a result, when we enter into moral disagreements, we have inductive support for the belief that any given stranger will be right about the contested matter at hand. Compare: when we note that other people generally perceive the ends of horse races well, we gain reason to believe that any given stranger at the race track generally perceives the ends of horse races well. And this belief, in turn, gives us some reason to trust any given stranger at the race track about the outcome of the horse race at hand. A robust background of agreement in some domain, in other words, is just the sort of thing that generally provides dispute-independent reason to consider one's opponents trustworthy about a disputed case in that domain.[15]

So our background of moral agreement gives us dispute-independent reason to trust strangers about the subject matter of moral disputes. Now, this may not mean that any single person's disagreement will call for much belief revision. But, as in the horse race case above, the numbers matter.[16] When enough people independently arrive at beliefs that contradict mine, and those opponents are to some extent independently credible, my confidence should drop dramatically.

To see why this result is so troubling, consider a case of actual disagreement. Suppose (as seems likely) that an enormous amount of people now and throughout history have believed that homosexual behavior is *pro tanto* morally impermissible. Conciliationism tells me to assess these people's epistemic credentials in a dispute-independent way. Even after setting aside all relevantly disputed beliefs, however, I have some reason to trust these people. Specifically, I have evidence that they believe the truth about most everyday moral questions. This means that, if my opponents are sufficiently numerous, Vavova's conciliationism will call on me to reduce my confidence in the permissibility of homosexuality. But this would be just the sort of spinelessness that conciliationists want to avoid; in this case, reduced confidence is certainly not "independently warranted" (Vavova 2014: 302).

This section made an initial case for the conclusion that any conciliationism that individuates disputes widely will recommend moral spinelessness. Even after we set aside a great deal of our moral thinking, our agreement about common-sense moral matters gives us dispute-independent reason to trust our opponents about moral questions that are controversial. The conciliationist who wants to individuate disputes widely must resist this claim. The next section explains why this task will be so difficult.

5. STRATEGIES FOR THE CONCILIATIONIST

This section will consider several strategies through which the conciliationist might attempt to reject the core claim of section 4: namely, that our background of moral

15 Is a background of perceptual agreement sufficient to give us reason to trust our opponents in cases like the horse race one? Some might suspect, instead, that it's our in-depth understanding of human perceptual faculties that gives us that reason. But that can't be right; even in ancient societies that had no understanding of human perceptual systems to speak of, widespread perceptual disagreements surely had the capacity to serve as epistemic defeaters. In those societies, a robust background of perceptual agreement gave members sufficient reason to believe that others' perceptual belief-forming methods were generally reliable.

16 Elga (2007: 494) and Vavova (2014: 313) agree.

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agreement gives us dispute-independent reason to trust even strangers about disputed moral questions. Section 5.1 considers an attempt to argue that, in the context of fundamental moral disagreements, our shared common-sense moral beliefs are not dispute-independent. Section 5.2 considers several ways to emphasize a gap between common-sense moral beliefs and controversial ones. Section 5.3 considers attempts to argue that, even though we have dispute-independent reason to trust our opponents, that reason is rendered irrelevant by a dispute-independent defeater.

In principle, all of these strategies are available not only to defenders of the wide approach (like Vavova), but also to defenders of the narrow approach (like Elga). But they are likely to hold less interest for the defenders of the narrow approach. If an argumentative strategy like Elga's were successful, the argument of section 4 would do nothing to deflate it. Regardless of whether agreement about common-sense moral issues provides some evidence of others' *trustworthiness*, the narrow approach suggests that it is usually outweighed by stronger evidence of *untrustworthiness* based in disagreements about "allied issues." So the strategies considered in this section are primarily interesting as attempts to save the wide approach from the argument of section 4.

5.1 Common-Sense Agreement is not Dispute-Independent

Section 4 suggested that we usually have ample dispute-independent reason to trust our moral opponents: we agree with them about a host of moral propositions. One way to resist the charge of spinelessness, then, is to argue that even these generally-agreed-upon moral propositions are not actually dispute-independent. This requires drawing the boundaries around moral disputes very widely indeed. What could justify such a move?

Some remarks from Vavova (2014) suggest a way to develop this strategy. She writes that, when moral disagreements don't "come down to some non-moral matter," they often "go too deep" to be epistemically troubling Vavova (2014: 323). Why? Well, "if the reason we disagree about abortion turns out to be *that we disagree about what morality requires*, then we have less independent ground than we thought" (2014: 323, emphasis original). The idea, I take it, is that fundamentally moral disagreements are usually disagreements over quite general principles. In the context of a disagreement that is really over some basic principle, p, we should not assess our interlocutors' reliability by considering whether we agree with them about matters that follow from p. In a disagreement that comes down to whether pain is bad, for instance, I must set aside all my moral beliefs that presuppose that pain is bad Vavova (2014: 324). In such cases, we have scant ground from which to evaluate our opponents' credentials.

This strategy relies on an implausibly systematic picture of moral thinking. To borrow Vavova's phrase, we can disagree about *what morality requires* in a particular case (or case-type) without disagreeing about *what morality requires* generally. Two people who disagree about whether morality requires strong constraints against killing embryos, for instance, could in principle agree about nearly all other moral matters. Now, granted, there are certain moral theories that offer only a single fundamental moral principle (e.g. the principle of utility). When we learn that a person is committed to a principle like this, we can justifiably infer a great deal about her moral thinking. But this is not how typical moral disagreements work; we are generally not justified in taking our opponents to rely on very systematic first-order normative theory. So when I learn that a person disagrees

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with me about the moral status of some act-type, I should generally not leap to any conclusions about the bedrock of this person's moral commitments.

To see this point, return to the example of homosexual behavior. When I learn that someone considers homosexual behavior *pro tanto* impermissible, should I conclude that our disagreement most likely comes down to a disagreement over some sweeping principle – like the principle that *acts that do not harm anyone else are* pro tanto *permissible*?[17] Surely not. It would be more charitable to draw a more modest conclusion: even if my opponent generally considers acts that do not harm others morally permissible, that trend in his thinking is defeated in this case. Since we are not justified in drawing conclusions about wide-reaching moral principles whenever we have a fundamentally moral disagreement, then, such disagreements need not always require us to set aside most of our moral beliefs.

5.2 *The Gap Between Common Sense and Controversy*

It's surely an oversimplification to treat all thinking about moral questions in the same way. Consider an analogy: what if we took near-universal agreement about many *mathematical* questions as sufficient reason to trust any given stranger about math? It would be ridiculous to say that, because people usually get two-digit addition problems right, we all have some reason to think that any given stranger will get a calculus problem right.[18] This analogy suggests a way in which the conciliationist might try to protect controversial moral beliefs: she can carve up moral inquiry into (at least) two epistemically significant classes and argue that our opponents' reliability about the former class gives us no reason to trust them about the latter class. This section will consider three ways of developing this strategy.

First, the conciliationist might note that some moral questions are more difficult than others. The mere fact that most people generally get the *easy* moral questions right may give us no reason to expect that they will get the *hard* moral questions right.

This approach cannot solve the problem of spinelessness. For one, it's far from clear that all the relevant controversial moral beliefs are difficult to form well. What's more, the *difficult* moral questions are not, intuitively, the ones which we are most entitled to retain in the face of disagreement. If we become convinced that moral controversy is explained by the difficulty of thinking clearly about certain moral questions, we thereby gain a reason to worry about *anyone's* ability – including our own – to answer those questions.[19] So conciliationists should not attempt to protect their dearest moral commitments by appealing to difficulty.

On to a second approach. The conciliationist might claim that our controversial moral beliefs have a different *level of generality* than do common-sense moral beliefs. Vavova, for instance, claims that we agree morally on "a lot of the cases" but increasingly disagree as matters become "more theoretical" Vavova (2014: 326). If this is right, then even if there is a great deal of moral agreement about particular cases, this agreement may provide no inductive support for the conclusion that people are trustworthy inquirers into the principles of normative ethics.

17 Thanks to Justin D'Arms for this example.

18 Cf. Rotondo (2015: 262–3).

19 Vavova grants this point Vavova (2014: 325). Cf. Kornblith (2010: 45); Frances (2010: 430, 446).

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There is a problem for this approach as well. Some of our cherished controversial moral beliefs are just as fine-grained as our most widely shared common-sense moral beliefs. We do not simply agree about the rightness or wrongness of act-tokens; we also agree a great deal about the rightness or wrongness of act-types. And some of the controversial beliefs about which we should most clearly be steadfast – for instance, the belief that homosexual behavior is *pro tanto* permissible – are themselves defeasible claims about the rightness or wrongness of act-types. The conciliationist, then, cannot protect these beliefs by appealing to their level of generality.[20]

Consider, finally, a third approach. Perhaps there is an important difference between the *methods* through which certain people form and maintain their common-sense beliefs and the methods through which they form and maintain their controversial ones. This may be a tempting way to think about our core example: widespread disagreement about homosexuality. Consider two classes of people: those who believe that homosexuality is *pro tanto* permissible (call them the defenders of homosexuality) and those who believe that homosexuality is *pro tanto* impermissible (call them the opponents of homosexuality). Now, suppose that the opponents and defenders of homosexuality alike form and maintain their common-sense moral beliefs in roughly the same way: say, through appeals to intuition. Suppose further that the defenders of homosexuality form their beliefs about homosexuality using the same method: they appeal to intuition. But suppose that the *opponents* of homosexuality usually form their beliefs about homosexuality through a different method. Rather than appealing to their intuitions, for example, suppose that they form their beliefs about the moral status of homosexuality by deferring to religious authority.

If this were an apt description of disagreement about homosexuality, conciliationists could explain why the defenders of homosexuality need not conciliate with its opponents. Here's how. Say that I am among the defenders of homosexuality. In the case as described, common-sense agreement gives me reason to think that the opponents of homosexuality are likely to be trustworthy *when they appeal to their intuitions*. By my lights, appeals to intuition will be a method that seems to bring the opponents of homosexuality to reach the right answers about a broad range of moral questions. But all this tells me nothing about whether they are trustworthy when, rather than appealing to intuitions, they defer to religious authority. So for all the reason I have to conciliate when strangers disagree with me on the basis of appeals to moral intuition, I may have no reason at all to conciliate when – as in the case at hand – strangers disagree with me on the basis of religious authority.[21]

A sharp difference between moral-belief-forming methods, then, could in principle help the conciliationist avoid moral spinelessness. But the facts on the ground about actual moral disagreements do not suggest that this strategy will be generally successful. That's because everyday moral methodology is fairly unified. When an opponent's

20 Vavova's writing suggests another reason to avoid this strategy: intuitively, our epistemic position with respect to general moral principles is *worse* than our epistemic position with respect to particular cases Vavova (2014: 326; cf. Wedgwood 2014: 36–8). If this is right, the conciliationist would get the wrong results by blocking the inference from others' reliability about particular cases to an expectation of trustworthiness about general principles. Disagreement would threaten beliefs about particular cases far more seriously than it threatened beliefs about general principles.

21 Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this strategy for the conciliationist.

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controversial belief is related to a particular causal influence, her common-sense moral beliefs are often related to that causal influence in the same way.

To see this, return to the suggestion, made above, that deference to religious authority is usually involved in moral opposition to homosexuality. Perhaps that is true. But it's also true that, among religious opponents of homosexuality, deference to religious authority is usually involved in the formation of even *common-sense* moral beliefs. Consider a few paradigmatic common-sense moral beliefs, like the beliefs that we ought to help the homeless, that our parents deserve our respect, and that even a stranger's pain can give us moral reason to act. Any significant relation that holds between a religious authority and the belief that homosexuality is impermissible is likely also to hold between that same religious authority and these common-sense beliefs. For instance, both controversial and common-sense beliefs are often learned as, and understood by believers to be, upshots of particular religious commitments. When asked to defend either sort of belief, a religious person will often cite the content of a religious text or the testimony of an authority figure. Finally, an adult religious person will likely sustain both common-sense and controversial moral beliefs not *merely* on the basis of a willingness to defer to religious authority, but also on the basis of a sense that their contents seem true.

When we characterize moral belief-forming methods in a more nuanced way, then, we do not find the sort of differences in moral methodology that would straightforwardly justify steadfastness in the face of widespread moral disagreement. Generally speaking, one's opponents will bring the same resources to bear in forming both their common-sense and their controversial moral beliefs. To the extent that we have good dispute-independent reason to consider these resources successful with respect to the former, we also generally have good dispute-independent reason to expect that they will be successful with respect to the latter.

5.3 Defeaters for Trust

Let's turn, finally, to a strategy that simply accepts the core point of section 4: that widespread agreement gives us dispute-independent reason to consider moral opponents trustworthy. Even so, the conciliationist can argue, *further* dispute-independent considerations usually outweigh, or otherwise defeat, this reason for trust. We'll consider two ways of developing this line of thought.

The first strategy that we'll consider bears some similarity to Elga's appeal to "allied issues." It involves an appeal to the sociological fact that certain moral beliefs tend to be accompanied by other beliefs. Because of these correlations, the fact that someone disagrees with me about certain moral claims makes her statistically likely to disagree with me in other ways. Given what I know about distribution of moral beliefs, the fact that a person disagrees with me about abortion may give me dispute-independent evidence about her views about, e.g., religion, gun control, or environmental policy. This sort of evidence, the conciliationist might argue, outweighs or otherwise defeats the evidence of trustworthiness that comes from widespread agreement about common-sense moral matters.

This strategy cannot justify a steadfast response in the cases that concern us. To see this, first note that the fact that you likely disagree with me about a related matter only gives me a reason to doubt your judgment about p if our disagreement about the related matter is evidence of something about your thinking with respect to p. In other words, *mere*

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correlations between disagreements cannot justify steadfastness. Now, it's entirely plausible that some clusters of disagreement are more than mere correlations. When I learn that you disagree with me about religion or gun control, I may get evidence suggesting that you were given a poor moral education, that you rely on corrupt sources of moral testimony, and so on. This is the way in which related disagreements might give me reason to question your judgment about abortion. They must support a belief that there is some bad-making feature of your moral thinking about abortion and other matters alike.

The problem is this: this crucial belief is usually not, on a wide individuation of disputes, dispute-independent.[22] So it is usually illegitimate for me to rely on this belief in assessing your epistemic credentials.[23] In a political disagreement with a person on the opposite side of the political spectrum, for instance, I am not entitled to rely on my belief (even if justified) that he was raised by a family with mistaken political views. This belief is surely contested, and it is directly relevant to the cluster of beliefs about which we disagree.

There is, moreover, good reason for conciliationists who individuate disputes widely to require us to set aside these contested beliefs. If I can appeal to relevantly contested beliefs about bad influences on my opponent's thinking, I can justify steadfast belief in even some cases where conciliation seems appropriate. Consider an example: two groups of detectives, who otherwise take one another to have spotless track records, tend to reach contradictory conclusions in neighborhood *X*. Say that the evidence suggests that this is no mere coincidence; it is a dispute-independent fact that, for some reason, at least one of the two groups does detective work poorly in *X*. Does knowledge of past disagreements in *X* entitle Group 1 to treat any new disagreement in *X* as a case where Group 2's inquiry is distorted? If so, they may be justified in steadfastly ignoring Group 2's judgment. But this seems contrary to the spirit of Independence. The right conciliationist verdict here is more cautious. At least one group is biased in neighborhood *X*, and in the absence of a dispute-independent tiebreaker, members of Group 1 should respect the possibility that they are the biased ones.

Conciliationists who individuate disputes widely, then, have good reason to set aside contested beliefs to the effect that something has gone wrong with their opponents' inquiry. But the fact that our opponents disagree with us in multiple ways only entitles us to consider them untrustworthy to the extent that it gives us dispute-independent reason to believe that something has gone wrong with their inquiry. So, on the wide approach, appeals to other instances of disagreement cannot help to provide a defeater for our reasons to trust moral opponents.[24]

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22 On a narrow individuation of disputes, such beliefs might well be dispute-independent. But, as noted in section 2, the narrow approach faces its own distinctive objections.

23 There may be some features that are always understood, in a dispute-independent way, to be bad influences on moral inquiry. (Perhaps partiality is one such feature.) But it seems quite unlikely that such features will always be present in a way that allows conciliationists to write off all their opponents.

24 This is not to say that the fact that moral disagreements tend to be correlated has no epistemic relevance. The more beliefs I set aside, the less dispute-independent reason I can have to trust any given interlocutor. But this is not enough to defeat the challenge raised in section 4. There, I argued that our impressive history of agreement about common-sense moral matters gives us reason to consider other moral thinkers trustworthy. So even if the clustering of moral disagreements with other disagreements sometimes requires us to set aside quite a few controversial moral beliefs at once, it surely

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Finally, let's consider an attempt to avoid spinelessness simply by appealing to the existence of controversy. On this approach, our knowledge of the fact *that there is controversy about p* can render irrelevant our inductive grounds for expecting people to get *p* right.

This idea is initially appealing. Even if humans are generally reliable about a certain class of moral judgments, that track-record has its limits. And in the context of any given widespread moral disagreement, we all know that the human population is *not* very reliable about the matter at hand; in such contexts, it is a dispute-independent fact that many people have false beliefs. So even the strongest track record cannot give us sufficient reason to expect that our interlocutors' general trustworthiness will carry over into controversial cases.

However, this sort of reasoning proves too much. If the conciliationist adopts it, she will allow objectionably dogmatic belief in even very simple non-moral cases. In the two-person horse race example, for instance, your knowledge of others' general perceptual reliability is a dispute-independent reason for you to take your single opponent's disagreement seriously. Can you dismiss this reason by simply noting that, between the two of you, there is controversy? Clearly not. Even though you have very strong reason to think that one of the two of you is mistaken in the case at hand, your knowledge of others' general perceptual reliability continues to give you dispute-independent reason to trust your interlocutor.[25]

The conciliationist might be tempted to argue that, though the mere fact that there is controversy in a group of two does not screen off or outweigh evidence of general reliability, controversy in a larger population can do so. But this fix also has unacceptable results. Intuitively, widespread cases of disagreement have (*ceteris paribus*) even more defeating power than two-person ones. It would be preposterous to say that, although a single stranger's disagreement about a horse race can require me to reduce my confidence, the disagreement of half of the stadium cannot. When I learn that the stadium is split, I know that I am part of a very widespread controversy – one which divides all the people who have any beliefs as to which horse won. And yet, clearly, I can have dispute-independent reason to take my opponents' judgment seriously in this case.

So conciliationists must allow that, even when I know that *p* is extremely controversial, I can have dispute-independent reason to trust people who disagree with me about *p*. The mere fact of controversy cannot solve the problem of spinelessness.

6. CONCLUSION

We've now considered two ways in which conciliationists can attempt to avoid the charge of spinelessness. For one, the conciliationist can individuate disputes narrowly. On this

does not require us to set aside any of the moral beliefs whose near-universal acceptance makes the argument of section 4 plausible.

25 There is another way for the conciliationist to explain the requirement to revise my belief in this example. Rather than suggesting that I retain dispute-independent reason to trust the perceptual trustworthiness of other race watchers, she can suggest that, upon learning of the controversy, I gain dispute-independent reason to consider both my opponents and myself untrustworthy. (Cf. Kornblith 2010: 45.) This is one way of satisfying GIRP; if my opponent and I are untrustworthy to just the same degree, she is at least as trustworthy as I am. On either interpretation, however, this case illustrates the point that the mere fact of controversy does not suffice to justify steadfast belief in the face of disagreement. (Thanks to an anonymous associate editor for suggesting discussion of this point.)

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approach, the conciliationist claims that we need not be spineless precisely because we *have* dispute-independent reasons to consider our interlocutors *untrustworthy*. Approaches of this sort will face two problems. First, it is difficult to imagine what sort of dispute-independent belief could justify a steadfast response to moral disagreements like the one between Ann and Beth without doing the same in paradigmatic cases for conciliation. (Recall the disagreement between groups of detectives in neighborhood X.) And second, such views inappropriately give deep epistemic significance to superficial questions about, for instance, how many disputes exist in a given case.

In light of these problems, the conciliationist might instead opt to individuate disputes widely. On this approach, the conciliationist claims that we need not be spineless precisely because we *lack* good dispute-independent reason to consider our opponents *trustworthy*. Approaches of this sort fail because they cannot plausibly go wide enough. To truly lack good dispute-independent reason to trust our moral opponents, we would have to set aside even our shared history of common-sense moral agreement. It's hard to see what could motivate such a move. Even on an approach that individuates disputes widely, then, we have reason to trust our moral opponents.

But just how bad is this result? Perhaps, even if the conciliationist accepts the conclusion that we have *some* reason to expect that any given stranger will be trustworthy about moral questions, she can argue that this will not require objectionable spinelessness. After all, according to GIRP, we need only revise our beliefs to the extent that we have *good* reason to trust our opponents. Is our shared backdrop of moral beliefs a *good* reason to trust our opponents? If not, moral disagreements with strangers never call for conciliation. And even if agreement *is* a good reason to trust our opponents, it might be good reason only to trust them a little. If so, moral disagreements with strangers only call for tiny reductions in confidence. Surely, this would not amount to objectionable spinelessness.

Conciliationists would go a long way toward solving the problem of spinelessness, then, if they could confidently claim that widespread moral agreement simply does not give us good reason (or gives us negligibly little reason) to trust others' moral judgment. But any claim to this effect is likely to be objectionably *ad hoc*. As we've already seen, there are reasons to think that moral agreement can be powerful enough to be epistemically significant. For one, the extent of moral agreement is vast and impressive. Moreover, a background of impressive agreement is just the sort of thing that, in other domains, can give us sufficient reason to conciliate. For example, it can require us to lose confidence in our perceptual judgments even when, as in the horse race case, only a single stranger disagrees.

These considerations amount to a provisional case that, whatever the right story is about the epistemic weight of background agreement, we all have plenty of reason to take certain moral disagreements seriously. If a single stranger's perceptual disagreement can call on us to revise our beliefs, the massive, widespread disagreement over homosexuality's permissibility plausibly can as well. The conciliationist who wants to avoid this conclusion must offer a positive proposal about the epistemic weight of agreement. Given the considerations above, there is reason to worry that any such story will have to take a gerrymandered, unprincipled approach to the epistemic significance of agreement across different subject matters.[26]

26 Thanks to Declan Smithies and Tristram McPherson for encouraging me to make these points explicit.

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Could the conciliationist shrug off the charge of spinelessness in a different way? Perhaps conciliationists can grant the surprising result that we should all become less confident in a few deeply held moral commitments, like the commitment to homosexuality's permissibility. How bad would this be?

Well, nothing like moral skepticism is lurking here; indeed, this paper has insisted that an enormous amount of our everyday moral thinking is totally safe from disagreement's defeating force. But to the extent that conciliationists were right to worry about spinelessness in the first place, they should also be worried about this local sort of spinelessness. First, the threat of belief revision is not contained to a handful of cherry-picked examples: conciliationism seriously threatens the justification of unpopular moral beliefs generally, from abolitionism in the 19th century to beliefs about the moral status of animals today. Second, a local spinelessness might be even more strikingly counterintuitive than wholesale moral skepticism. I would, granted, be very surprised to learn that my moral beliefs are globally unjustified. But I would be far more surprised to learn that, though most of my moral beliefs are adequately justified, my belief about homosexuality's permissibility is not. If I know anything at all about morality, I know that homosexuality is *pro tanto* permissible; I cannot imagine losing confidence in this belief without also losing confidence in *all* my moral thinking.

In addressing the problem of spinelessness, conciliationists attempt to show that, wherever their theory calls for belief revision, that belief revision is intuitively plausible. But when it comes to certain cases of moral disagreement, conciliationists are not in a position to claim that their theories can deliver this result.[27]

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