

■ NEW PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

ROUTLEDGE

# MORAL DISAGREEMENT

RACH COSKER-ROWLAND



# MORAL DISAGREEMENT

Widespread moral disagreement raises ethical, epistemological, political, and metaethical questions. Is the best explanation of our widespread moral disagreements that there are no objective moral facts and that moral relativism is correct? Or should we think that just as there is widespread disagreement about whether we have free will but there is still an objective fact about whether we have it, similarly, moral disagreement has no bearing on whether morality is objective? More practically, is it arrogant to stick to our guns in the face of moral disagreement? Must we suspend belief about the morality of controversial actions such as eating meat and having an abortion? And does moral disagreement affect the laws that we should have? For instance, does disagreement about the justice of heavily redistributive taxation affect whether such taxation is legitimate? In this thorough and clearly written introduction to moral disagreement and its philosophical and practical implications, Rach Cosker-Rowland examines and assesses the following topics and questions:

- How does moral disagreement affect what we should do and believe in our day-to-day lives?
- Epistemic peerhood and moral disagreements with our epistemic peers.
- Metaethics and moral disagreement.
- Relativism, moral objectivity, moral realism, and non-cognitivism.
- Moral disagreement and normative ethics.
- Liberalism, democracy, and disagreement.
- Moral compromise.
- Moral uncertainty.

Combining clear philosophical analysis with summaries of the latest research and suggestions for further reading, *Moral Disagreement* is ideal for students of ethics, metaethics, political philosophy, and philosophical topics that are closely related, such as relativism and scepticism. It will also be of interest to those in related disciplines such as public policy and philosophy of law.

**Rach Cosker-Rowland** is a Lecturer in the School of Philosophy, Religion, and History of Science at the University of Leeds, UK. They are the author of *The Normative and the Evaluative*, and the co-editor of *Companions in Guilt Arguments in Metaethics* (Routledge, 2019).

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# MORAL DISAGREEMENT

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**For Zoë, with whom I disagree both more and less than  
anyone else**



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# CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Metaethics: the descriptive consequences of moral disagreement</b>	<b>17</b>
2 Explaining moral disagreement	19
3 Making room for disagreement	47
4 Interpreting moral disagreements	67
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Epistemology and normative ethics: normative personal consequences of moral disagreement</b>	<b>83</b>
5 The epistemic significance of peer disagreement	85
6 Applied epistemology of moral disagreement	102
7 From what we ought to believe to what we ought to do	125
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>Political philosophy: normative interpersonal consequences of moral disagreement</b>	<b>145</b>
8 Moral compromise	147
9 Public reason, legitimate state action, and justifiability to all	157
10 Democracy and deliberative restraint	180



<b>PART IV</b>	
<b>Metaethics and disagreement's normative implications</b>	<b>199</b>
11 Metaethics and the normative implications of moral disagreement	201
12 Conclusion	227
Glossary	230
<i>References</i>	243
<i>Index</i>	255

# ILLUSTRATIONS

## FIGURES

1.1	The switch trolley case	3
1.2	The footbridge case	4
2.1	The Structure of Constructivism and Robust Realism	24
2.2	The Structure of Relativism	25
7.1	Moral margin of error	143
9.1	Reasons that all reasonable persons share vs those that only some reasonable persons share	166

## TABLES

3.1	When we disagree and when we don't	50
7.1	Mineshafts	128
7.2	The Demon's Mathematical Threat	131
7.3	An inter-theoretic moral value comparison	136
8.1	A Pragmatic Reason to Compromise	148
8.2	What we ought to believe in response to disagreement	150
8.3	What policies we ought to pursue in light of disagreement	150
9.1	Rawlsian and Gaussian public reason	167
11.1	Mineshafts	216

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## PREFACE

I grew up in a very politically involved working class household. I was surrounded by trade unionists and left-wing activists canvassing for the Labour party. We lived in Nottinghamshire, on the edge of the north of England, a Labour stronghold.<sup>1</sup> When I was 10 we moved to a village near Bude, a sea-side town in Cornwall at the other end of the country. Cornwall was much more conservative than Nottinghamshire. I'd never found myself in a political disagreement before I moved. But now I frequently would. My local MP in Nottinghamshire was strongly anti-hunting: he'd been proposing a ban on fox-hunting for years. And Labour eventually got a ban on fox-hunting through parliament. But I now lived in a rural farming community. On my school bus teenagers would chastise the Labour government for not understanding their way of life, and for banning something they said was integral to the functioning of local farms.

In Bude, one of the first disagreements that I found myself in was with my new best friend. We were in a tiny rural school. We were both doing well academically, and we also liked the same video games, films, and were both big into football. One afternoon he said that his parents supported the right-wing Conservative (Tory) party. He asked me which political party my parents supported (by which he meant, which party was my family's). I said it was Labour. I still remember his response: 'Oh, what do you know anyway?' he exclaimed, before walking away. I remember this response because it struck me as both right and wrong. Yeah, of course, the fact that he and his parents were Tories didn't make me change my view at all, so I wouldn't expect the fact that my parents and I disagreed with him to make much difference to him either. And there wouldn't be too much point in us talking about it. Other things were more interesting to talk about anyway! But at the same time I did know things. He didn't really know about how politically engaged I'd been in Nottinghamshire: that doesn't come up when you have *Mario Kart* and *The Matrix* to discuss instead! But even if he'd have known all that, it's not clear that it would or should have mattered. My political upbringing was in a cosy echo-chamber that intensified the opinions I inherited from my parents. But then that was the same for him.

We often find ourselves in moral and political disagreements where we know a lot about those with whom we disagree because they are our friends, family members, colleagues, classmates, members of our clubs or societies, or because they are in the public eye (politicians, public intellectuals, celebrities, academics). We find ourselves in such disagreements about immigration policy, freedom of speech, taxing the rich, supporting the poor, what it's okay

to do in a relationship, whether certain kinds of relationships are okay, eating meat, drinking milk, testing on animals, euthanasia, whether torture is ever permissible, affirmative action, the death penalty, abortion, gun control, our charitable obligations, whether certain kinds of police responses are permissible, and whether particular international sanctions and military actions are right or just. We disagree about whether it is just to penalise recipients of social security or unemployment benefits for failing to apply for a certain job when they are out of work; some think such welfare conditionality is just and that we do not use enough of it, others think that we shouldn't have any such conditionality at all. We disagree about the permissibility of certain activist tactics such as no-platforming, road blocks, locking on, and sabotage. And, as I finish this book in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, we disagree about whether it is right to continue lockdowns that are crippling our economies and destroying millions of peoples' lives for the sake of saving (tens of) thousands of lives.

For at least some of these issues, we often think that those with whom we disagree are our *epistemic equals* on the topics about which we disagree; that is, that they're as sensitive to the issues relevant to this topic and as likely to be right about it as we are. Another's being your epistemic equal or peer about a matter involves their having something like approximately equal epistemic credentials about it: their having capacities for assessing the evidence about the matter that are as good as your own, their being equally likely to get the right answer about that matter, or having as good evidence as you have about it. When we morally disagree with others whom we believe to be our epistemic equals about a particular topic, we think that they know about as much as we do about it, have thought about it about as much as we have, and have arguments for their views. We just disagree about how to interpret some idea, we have different moral intuitions or inclinations, or they have some evidence or data that we don't have, and we have some that they don't have.

It can be worrying to think that we are in moral disagreements with our epistemic equals about issues that we have strong and relatively settled moral convictions about. How can we reasonably stick with our own views given that our epistemic equals disagree with us? It can seem very arrogant to do so. Doing so seems like illegitimately privileging our thought and reasoning above theirs. And it seems odd to think that this is okay. But even more worrying, if we can't reasonably maintain our moral views, how can we reasonably and justifiably act on them? Normally if you can't reasonably believe something, you shouldn't act on it: if I don't know whether the supermarket will be open past 5 p.m., I shouldn't act as if it will be open past 5! So, disagreements with our epistemic equals about morality may have implications for what we ought to do, as well as what we can reasonably believe and know. [Part II](#) of this book focuses squarely on the implications of moral disagreement for what we can reasonably believe and do.

Where [Part II](#) of the book focuses on the consequences of moral disagreement for what we can be justified in believing and doing, [Part I](#) focuses on the descriptive implications of moral disagreement for how we should understand what morality is like. These descriptive implications don't depend on whether the moral disagreements that we find ourselves in are with our epistemic equals or not. In the US, over 5 million NRA members and close to half of 18–29-year-olds believe that we have rights to own guns; most Europeans disagree (BBC 2019). A significant proportion of the 41 million Yoruba people in Nigeria believe that it is permissible to scarify their young children's faces to identify their heritage or for the purpose of beatification; many others disagree. How do we explain moral disagreements like these? If you think that these millions of parents and gun owners are very wrong about guns and scarification (respectively), how so? How come you have access to the moral truth and they don't? A natural thought is that it's not that you are hooked up to the moral truth in a way that they're not, but rather that our differing moral views are just a product of our different cultures. There is a strong gun-owning culture in the US but not in Europe, and there is a strong cultural practice of scarification in Nigeria but not elsewhere. And this explains why people in these different places have different moral views. (I was brought up in a left-wing environment, my friend was brought up in a more right-wing environment, and that explains why we held different political views.) But if our moral views are just a product of our cultures, then what these views are about cannot be entirely independent of our cultures. In this case, some argue that whether an action is right or wrong isn't a matter that there is an objective truth about: morality is rather just relative to us or our cultures.

However, the idea that there are no objective moral truths seems to clash with our everyday moral practice. If we didn't think that there was an objective truth about the morality of abortion, vegetarianism, gun control, euthanasia, and legitimate warfare, then why would we make arguments for different views about these things and disagree with one another about them; if there were no objective moral truths about these things, then there would be nothing to disagree about and to make arguments for, only different preferences and ways of life to express. But when we disagree and argue morally we seem to do more than express our preferences or our ways of life. To express a preference or way of life we do not need to make a complicated argument. Pro-choicers and pro-lifers seem to make inconsistent claims. But when we express preferences or ways of life we do not make inconsistent claims. If I say that I like my family's practice of going on holidays to small islands, bird watching, and playing board games, and you say that you prefer your family's metropolitan lifestyle of going to the ballet and having expensive dinners, we don't disagree or express inconsistent propositions: the fact that *A* likes *X*, or *A*'s way of life is *X*, is consistent with the fact that *B* likes *Y*, or *B*'s way of life is *Y*. But the claim that abortion is wrong is inconsistent

with the claim that it's permissible. Furthermore, we treat many moral claims, such as that gender and racial equality are right and that homosexuality is morally permissible, as though they are objective truths: we do not think that those who disagree with us about these matters just have different tastes or preferences from us but rather that they're making a fundamental mistake. [Part I](#) of this book discusses the implications of moral disagreement for debates about the objectivity of morality and whether moral judgments are just expressions of preferences, that is, for metaethics.

The final area that this book focuses on is political philosophy. A long liberal tradition in political philosophy has sought to find legitimate ways to accommodate the many moral disagreements that we find within particular societies and nations. Even if Catholicism is the true religion and the Pope has a direct connection to the moral truth, it would seem wrong for a state to force all of its non-Catholic citizens to conform with the dictates of Catholicism. But in holding this view aren't we just holding another view about the moral truth? (That it's wrong for a state to impose its moral views on others.) Some argue that the answer is no. Many political liberals hold that in order for a law to be legitimate it must be possible to justify it to all of those whom it coerces, where to justify a law to someone is to give them a reason that fits with their current values. These liberals seek to find principles for the legitimacy of a state and its laws that take very seriously the moral disagreements in pluralistic societies. [Part III](#) of the book focuses on the political upshot, or lack thereof, of moral disagreement, on the implications of moral disagreement for the laws and states that are legitimate as well as for how we ought to act, reason, and compromise when discussing and making policy decisions.

The main aim of the book is to provide a thorough introduction to the topic of moral disagreement that puts readers in a position to understand and evaluate contemporary work about the significance of moral disagreement for moral and political philosophy. The book also has two further aims. First, it aims to show that moral disagreement makes a difference to the metaethical theories we should accept as well as to what we should believe and do. Part of the way in which the book does this may illustrate the value of philosophy. For it shows that abstract philosophical work on moral disagreement makes a difference to what we should think and do in our everyday lives. Second, the book aims to link discussions of moral disagreement in different domains (e.g. moral epistemology and political philosophy) together and to link discussions of moral disagreement to other relevant work in moral philosophy to reveal unexplored features of the significance of moral philosophy and its limits. Accordingly, all chapters of the book summarise and introduce work on the significance of moral disagreement. But some parts of it, particularly [Chapters 2, 6, 7, and 8](#) (and the final sections of [Chapters 4 and 10](#)), go beyond this literature in evaluating arguments that have yet to be evaluated,

drawing out the implications of particular discussions of moral disagreement, and bringing discussions in different areas together.

This book is an introduction to contemporary work on moral disagreement that aims to be as comprehensive as possible. But it deals with several very different and large areas of philosophy including moral metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics, as well as applied ethics, normative ethics, political philosophy, and applied moral epistemology. Because of this, there are limits to how comprehensive it can be. For instance, this book cannot at all claim to comprehensively deal with issues about how moral disagreement is or may be important in political philosophy and political theory; that would be a book in itself. And because it is a general introduction aimed at anyone with a philosophical interest in moral disagreement that could not be even longer than it already is, some discussions are slightly more simplified and more cursory than they could have been. For instance, [Chapter 3](#) discusses moral semantics very briefly and in a somewhat simplified way. But I still hope that this discussion can be of use to those with some metaethical knowledge as well as those with next to none.

## NOTE

- 1 At the time; alas it is no more.





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## INTRODUCTION

This book focusses on moral disagreements that are fundamentally the result of differences of moral views rather than differences of judgments about empirical facts. I will refer to such disagreements as disagreements in moral principles or values. §1.1 explains what these moral disagreements are. §1.2 shows that many moral disagreements are disagreements in moral principles or values.

### 1.1. WHAT ARE DISAGREEMENTS IN MORAL PRINCIPLES OR VALUES?

Suppose that Alice disagrees with Becky and Christina about whether their government should tax the rich heavily (e.g. by taxing earnings at a rate of 75% above £50,000). Alice believes that their government morally should adopt such a heavily redistributive taxation policy and that it would be wrong and unjust for her government to fail to do so. In contrast, Becky and Christina judge that their government should not adopt such a heavily redistributive taxation policy and that it would be wrong and unjust for their government to do so. But the reasons why Becky and Christina believe this are different.

Becky believes that it would be wrong and unjust for the government to adopt this tax because she believes that it would be very bad for the least well-off. She believes that if this tax were adopted, most of the most productive and creative industries, highest payers of taxes and providers of jobs, would leave the country. The country's currency would become devalued and costs of living would spiral because the country would become dependent on

foreign imports and would have to pay more for them due to its devalued currency. There would be less jobs. And the economy would tank leading to a vicious cycle of negative consequences for the least well-off.

Alice disagrees with Becky about these consequences. She believes that their country has enough cultural attractions to prevent the big companies leaving and that even if some did they can rely on many of their own products and would still have their own goods to sell to those abroad if the big companies left. She thinks that everyone always scaremongers about the awful consequences of heavily redistributive taxation. But we have no evidence that the consequences of such taxation would be so bad other than the claims of those who have an interest in our government not adopting such taxes—and so whose views on this matter should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Becky and Alice agree that their government should pursue the taxation policy that benefits the least well-off. They just disagree about the empirical facts relevant to figuring out which policy is in fact best for the least well-off. So, Alice and Becky's disagreement is not fundamentally a moral disagreement; it's not a moral disagreement at all at heart, it's a disagreement about the non-moral empirical facts.

Now, in contrast, Christina agrees with Alice that strongly redistributive taxation would be better for the least well-off but she nevertheless judges that implementing such a strongly redistributive taxation policy would be wrong and unjust because she (libertarian that she is) judges that such strongly redistributive taxation would contravene the self-ownership rights of those who would be taxed; such taxation, she believes, would be akin to forced labour.<sup>1</sup> Alice's disagreement with Christina is fundamentally a moral disagreement. This is because it does not boil down to a disagreement about empirical economic or sociological facts, such as about which policies would make things go better for some group.

We can distinguish two types of such fundamentally moral disagreements. The broadest type of such disagreements are disagreements in moral principles or values. What distinguishes Alice's disagreement with Christina from Alice's disagreement with Becky is that Alice and Christina hold different moral principles or values: Alice accepts the principle that justice requires that we make the poor better off; Christina does not accept this principle. In contrast, Alice and Becky do not have different moral values or accept different moral principles; they both accept that justice requires that we make the poor better off.

Some disagreements in moral principles or values are disagreements that are the result of religious disagreements. For instance, many disagreements about the moral status of abortion are disagreements in moral principles or values that are the result of religious disagreements. Some people believe that it is wrong to abort fetuses because they hold religious beliefs according to which human life begins at conception and it is always wrong to end a human

life. Similarly, many moral disagreements about the permissibility of euthanasia, homosexuality, and polygamous relationships are disagreements in moral principles or values that are the result of religious disagreements.

Some disagreements in moral principles or values are *not* the result of religious or other philosophical disagreements. We can call these disagreements *pure* moral disagreements. Alice and Christina's moral disagreement may well be a pure moral disagreement. Suppose that Alice and Christina are both atheists and neither have really studied or thought about philosophical claims, neither have particularly strong views about causation, free will or any other potentially relevant matter. In this case, their disagreement about whether we should tax the rich is just due to their holding different moral principles, and not the result of their holding different religious views or different (non-moral/political) philosophical claims such as different metaphysical or epistemological views. In contrast, moral disagreements about euthanasia, homosexuality, abortion, and polygamy that are the result of the parties to these disagreements holding different religious views are not pure moral disagreements.

Perhaps the most clear-cut case of a pure moral disagreement is the disagreement about what we ought to do in trolley cases. In the switch trolley case, there is a runaway trolley (a tram, if you're British or Australian). And if it keeps on going on the track that it's on, it will run over and kill five innocent people who are tied to the track. Suppose that you're stood next to the track. There's a lever that you can pull. If you pull the lever, you will switch the trolley so that instead of carrying on going on the track that it's on it will go down a sidetrack. There is only one innocent person tied to the sidetrack. So, if you pull the lever and turn the trolley onto the sidetrack, it will only kill one person rather than five. The majority of people think that it's right or permissible to pull the switch in this case, to save the five lives at the cost of one, though a significant minority think that it would not be wrong to do this.<sup>2</sup>

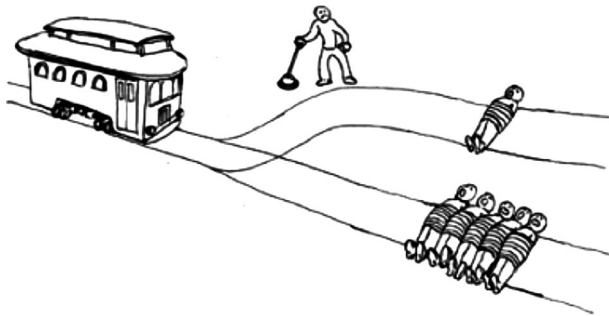


Figure 1.1 The switch trolley case.

In the footbridge trolley case, most things are the same: there's a runaway trolley and if it keeps on going on the track that it's on, it will run over and kill five innocent people who have been tied to the track. But in this case, there's no switch and no sidetrack. Instead, there's a bridge above the track. You are on the bridge. Next to you is a very heavy innocent man, leaning over the bridge. The man is just heavy enough that if you pushed him off the bridge and onto the track, he and his weight would stop the trolley in its tracks, the trolley would come to a halt, and the lives of the 5 who are tied to the track would be saved. (You know that your bodyweight on its own would not be enough to stop the trolley.) However, if you pushed the heavy man off the bridge and onto the track, the heavy man would die in the process. What is it morally permissible, right, and wrong to do in this case?

People frequently want to add in further details to the footbridge trolley case. We can explicitly rule all of these out: suppose that all the lives involved are equally good, all the people are equally good people, and that you have no special relationship to any of them. Suppose that you will forget about what you did either way and that no one will find out what you did. So, there are no reasons to hold that pushing or refraining from pushing is good or bad outside of the conditions stipulated in the case, namely that pushing would involve pushing one person to their death in front of a trolley in order to stop the trolley from killing five people.

People disagree about whether we should push the heavy man off the bridge. A majority of people judge that it would be wrong to do so. Others judge that it wouldn't be wrong to push, that it is permissible to push, or even that, if we are in this situation, we are morally required to push the one off the bridge so that five people's lives are saved. They argue that it is arbitrary to hold that we should pull the switch in the switch case but that we should not push in footbridge. Since all the relevant features of these two cases are the same: in both cases we can save 5 lives at the cost of 1 other, with no other additional bad consequences.<sup>3</sup>

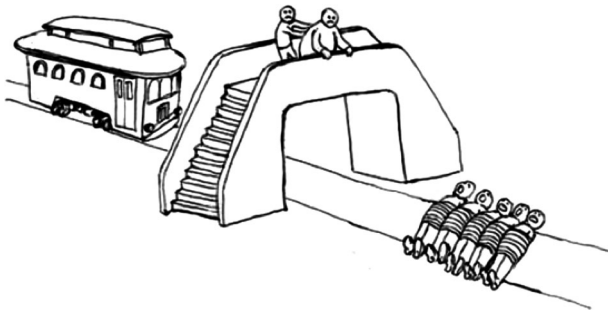


Figure 1.2 The footbridge case.

These disagreements about what we should do in trolley cases are disagreements in moral principles or values for they survive when any grounds for differences in empirical judgments are explicitly stipulated away. But many disagreements about what we should do in trolley cases are also pure moral disagreements. Some may believe that we should not push the heavy man in the footbridge case because of their religious views and disagree with those who believe it is permissible to push the heavy man because of the different religious views they hold. But many atheists and people with the same religious views also disagree about whether we should push the heavy man off the bridge. They disagree about what we morally ought to do not because they hold different religious views or different views about metaphysics or epistemology more broadly; rather they disagree because they have different moral intuitions about this case or because they accept different moral principles. Those who hold that it's wrong to push hold principles such as that it is always wrong to intentionally kill a person, to kill a person with your hands, to breach someone's rights by seriously harming or killing them, or to kill one person to save 5 lives (rather than to, for instance, save 2 billion lives). Those who think that we should push disagree, believe that we should reject these principles and/or hold that we should do whatever will promote the most lives being saved in trolley cases.

So, some moral disagreements are just due to disagreements about the empirical consequences of actions and policies (e.g. Alice and Becky's). These are, *in a sense*, not really moral disagreements at all; they are disagreements about other things such as economics. These disagreements are not disagreements in moral principles or values. Other disagreements are disagreements in which the parties disagree because they hold different moral principles. Even if a disagreement about vegetarianism or abortion is a result of one of the parties to this disagreement being a devout Christian of a certain denomination and the other being an atheist, they still hold different moral principles. These disagreements *are* disagreements in moral principles or values but *are not* pure moral disagreements. Finally, some moral disagreements are entirely moral. They bottom out in moral disagreements such as those about the trolley problem. These moral disagreements are not disagreements due to disagreements about metaphysics, epistemology, religious claims, or the empirical consequence of actions or policies. They are disagreements in moral principles or values that *are also* pure moral disagreements.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the time pure moral disagreements and disagreements in moral principles and values are disagreements that would survive even if parties to these disagreements agreed on all the relevant non-moral facts and information. So, a good heuristic for thinking about whether a disagreement is a disagreement in moral principles or values is to ask whether that disagreement would survive agreement about all the relevant non-moral facts such as all the economic, psychological, sociological, facts. If this disagreement would

survive such non-moral agreement, then it is a disagreement in moral principles or values.<sup>5</sup>

Some moral disagreements are only partially disagreements in moral principles or values or only partially pure moral disagreements. For instance, suppose that you disagree with someone about whether abortion is permissible partially because you hold different views about when a foetus can survive outside of the womb and partially because you hold different moral principles. This disagreement is (only) partially a disagreement in moral principles or values. (Note that we can be in a disagreement in moral principles or values without explicitly or implicitly holding a particular moral principle. I just use this name because it is clearer than any alternative.)<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2. HOW MUCH DISAGREEMENT IN MORAL PRINCIPLES OR VALUES IS THERE?

There is clearly a lot of moral disagreement. Surveys seem to show that U.S. opinion splits close to 50/50 on the morality of abortion, the death penalty, same-sex relationships, and physician-assisted suicide (McCarthy, 2014). There is inter- and intra-cultural disagreement about whether it's sometimes justifiable to torture people in order to do good for others/society at large: in the United States around 45% of people believe it is sometimes justifiable; 53% believe it is not. 74% of people in China and India believe that torture is sometimes justified; while 81% of people in Spain believe that torture is never justified (McCarthy, 2017). When I began writing this book in the first quarter of 2019 in Melbourne, Australia, the middle of the city was awash with vegan protesters shutting down the public transport system. Animal activists, in Melbourne but also in Queensland, were invading farms on mass to liberate animals and to show the world both how animals are treated in Aussie farms and how wrong they believe this treatment of animals to be. A majority of people do not agree with vegans that our practice of farming animals is morally wrong.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in London, Extinction Rebellion (XR) protestors were shutting down major roads to protest a lack of political action on climate change. Many politicians, police chiefs, newspaper owners, and members of the public did not, and still do not, think that the issue is as pressing as XR protestors think it is, and believe that there are moral problems with XR's tactics. There is also clearly disagreement about the taxation policies that our governments should adopt and about whether, and which, gun control laws and restrictions on immigration our governments should adopt as well as about freedom of speech, what it's okay to do in a relationship, affirmative action, the death penalty, our charitable obligations, and whether certain kinds of sanctions on other countries or military action in other countries' territory are right or just. But how much of this disagreement about what we ought to do, what's good, and what justice requires is disagreement in moral principles or values?

We have quite a lot of anecdotal evidence that many moral disagreements are disagreements in moral principles or values. Although we do not know exactly how much disagreement about abortion is disagreement in moral principles and/or values, it seems safe to say that quite a large amount of it is, since quite a large number of these disagreements are the result of religious differences. Although some people are vegan for environmental or health reasons many are vegan because they believe that it is, other things equal, wrong to kill beings that are capable of feeling pleasure and pain—regardless of whether there are further bad consequences to doing so. And many people disagree with them about this. It's not entirely clear how much of the disagreement about the morality and justice of the death penalty is disagreement in moral principles or values. However, many people are in favour of the death penalty not just because of the deterrent benefits that it brings but rather because they believe that murderers deserve it.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, although we do not know how many of the disagreements about the justice of redistributive taxation are disagreements in moral principles or values (like Alice and Christina's disagreement in §1.1), we know that at least some of them are: libertarians are in disagreements in moral principles or values with liberal egalitarians and socialists for instance.<sup>9</sup>

A well-known body of work on moral disagreements within Western societies stems from Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek's Moral Foundations Survey. The survey aims to ascertain the moral principles or values of those who take it. It also asks respondents questions about how they self-identify politically. Over two hundred thousand responses to the survey have been recorded. The authors argue that the results show that conservatives view the extent to which an action involves disrespect for an authority figure or the traditions of their society, disloyalty, or doing something disgusting, impure, 'unnatural', or degrading as more morally important in determining the moral status of that action than liberals do.<sup>10</sup> And the authors take this disagreement to be one that boils down to a conflict in moral values. It is not entirely clear from the Moral Foundations Survey data whether this disagreement between liberals and conservatives is an instance of disagreement in moral principles or values or not. It could be that many conservatives think that a society is stronger, happier, and safer if people are loyal, respect authority, and don't do things that others regard as disgusting, unnatural, or degrading; this is a traditional conservative thought.<sup>11</sup> And the survey does not differentiate between people who think that loyalty and authority are important for those reasons alone and those who believe they are important for other reasons too. But it seems relatively safe to presume that not all conservatives believe that it is just the good consequences of loyalty and respect for authority that give us reasons to be loyal and respect authority: some people think that a society without family loyalty and respect for elders and traditions would be bad in itself even if such a society would



not lead to worse economic consequences than one with such respect and loyalty.<sup>12</sup> If this is right, then at least a portion of the moral disagreements that Graham, Haidt, and Nosek point to between social conservatives and liberals are disagreements in moral principles or values.<sup>13</sup>

As we discussed in §1.1, all disagreements among those who in fact understand the switch and footbridge trolley cases are disagreements in moral principles or values and many of these disagreements will be pure moral disagreements too. Several studies have found a lot of disagreement about these cases. For instance, in some studies people split 60/40 about whether it is permissible to push the heavy man off the bridge in the footbridge trolley case.<sup>14</sup>

Disagreements about trolley cases may seem irrelevant to real life. But trolley cases are, in fact, very similar to several real-life cases. In World War II the British government found themselves in a situation in which they could feed misleading information to the Nazis which would lead them to bomb areas of London that were less densely populated than those that were currently being bombed. But in directing bombs to less densely populated areas, the government would be redirecting a threat from killing a greater number of innocent people to killing a smaller number of innocent people, just as we would be doing if we pulled the switch in the switch trolley case. As Edmonds (2010) documents, the government were divided over whether it was permissible to redirect the Nazi bombs.

Some utilitarians argue that we shouldn't worry so much about trolley cases because we often sanction the building of new roads, railways, or sports stadiums in full knowledge that building these things will lead to a number of deaths that would not have occurred otherwise (either by those using the roads or the construction workers building these amenities). But nonetheless we accept the cost of these predictable deaths as a reasonable cost for the general well-being promoted by better roads, railways, and sports facilities. If the happiness of a greater number can outweigh the deaths of a few unknown people, then redirecting a threat away from the many towards the few is at least permissible.<sup>15</sup>

Somewhat similar debates also occurred in Western countries during the lockdowns that aimed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. Some argued that we should not prioritise the saving of thousands of lives that the lockdowns were aimed at saving over the severe costs to millions that would inevitably result from the dire economic consequences of these lockdowns. Others argued that saving tens of thousands of lives should take priority over the economy—even given the predictable negative consequences to many of an economic crash. Given that disagreements about trolley cases are pure moral disagreements, many of these disagreements may be pure moral disagreements too.

Some philosophers who hold that moral disagreement has significant implications for moral philosophy have done in-depth empirical work to shed

light on whether salient moral disagreements are (i) disagreements in moral principles or values, (ii) pure moral disagreements, or neither. (This work will be important in the next chapter.) The first such empirical investigation by a philosopher interested in the significance of moral disagreement that I know of is Richard Brandt's. In 1954 Brandt turned anthropologist to investigate the ethics of the Hopi, a Native American Tribe in Arizona, in an attempt to ascertain the extent to which any moral disagreements that we have with them are disagreements in moral principles or values or pure moral disagreements. Brandt found that (many of) the Hopi did not seem to believe there to be anything wrong with playing with birds in a way that we would see as torturing them. As Brandt (1954, p. 213) puts it:

[Hopi c]hildren sometimes catch birds and make 'pets' of them. They may be tied to a string, to be taken out and 'played' with. This play is rough, and birds seldom survive long. [According to one informant:] 'Sometimes they get tired and die. Nobody objects to this.'<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to (many of the) Hopi, most of us (now) believe that it's wrong to make birds suffer just for fun. Brandt (1954, p. 103) tried to figure out whether this disagreement was due to differences in empirical or religious beliefs or whether it was a pure moral disagreement. He could find no non-pure moral disagreement: the Hopi didn't have any relevant false non-moral beliefs such as that birds don't feel pain or that animals are rewarded for martyrdom in the afterlife. Neither did the Hopi regard birds as pure machines; rather, according to Brandt, they regarded animals as 'closer to the human species than does the average [American]' (Brandt, 1954, p. 245). So, it seems that most Americans find themselves in a pure moral disagreement with the Hopi about the permissibility, badness, or objectionable status of causing animals to suffer for fun.<sup>17</sup>

In their 1996 book, Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen showed that: (a) white males in the south of the US are much more likely than white males in other regions of the US to be involved in homicides resulting from arguments; (b) white Southerners are more likely than Northerners to believe that violence would be extremely justified in response to a variety of affronts and to believe that if a man fails to respond violently to such provocation, he is 'not much of a man'; (c) southern states allow greater freedom to use violence in defence of both oneself and one's property than do northern states; (d) southern employers were more sympathetic to job applications from a prospective employee who had killed another in a barroom brawl after the person they killed had boasted of sleeping with the applicant's fiancée and asked the applicant to step outside (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). John Doris and Alexandra Plakias (2008a, pp. 315–318) argue that this data shows that Northerners and Southerners disagree about the permissibility of interpersonal violence, and

that it is very unlikely that this disagreement between them is the result of a disagreement about the non-moral facts. This is because all the data in Nisbett and Cohen's work seems to indicate that both Northerners and Southerners agree about all the relevant non-moral facts.<sup>18</sup> So, the disagreement between Northerners and Southerners appears to be a pure moral disagreement. (Perhaps this disagreement is due to a disagreement in religious beliefs. In this case it would be a disagreement in moral principles or values rather than a pure moral disagreement. But it is hard to see what religious differences could lead to such differences in views about the permissibility of interpersonal violence.)<sup>19</sup>

Many people think that it is morally worse to actively kill than to let someone die by refraining to help them; for instance, that it is morally worse to poison someone than to refrain from sending money to starving children in a faraway country and thereby let these children die. If actively killing is morally worse than letting die, then there is a moral difference between what ethicists call actions and omissions. Fraser and Hauser (2010, pp. 551–552) discuss data that reveals that British, American, and Canadian people accept that there is a moral difference between actions and omissions (e.g. that it is morally worse to harm someone than to pass by while they come to harm). But rural Mayans do not judge that there is a moral difference between actions and omissions. They argue that this disagreement is very likely to be a pure moral disagreement because Mayans do not have views about causation that are different from Westerners and Mayans do not have different religious and supernatural beliefs that bear on the actions and omissions that they were asked about.

### 1.3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

So many moral disagreements are disagreements in moral principles or values. This book asks whether disagreements in moral principles or values make a difference to what moral principles or values we should accept, what we should do in our everyday lives, what political institutions may legitimately do, as well as how we should understand what morality itself is like. It is divided into three parts. [Part II](#) discusses how disagreements in moral principles or values can make a difference to what we ought to believe and do in our everyday lives. It discusses how abstract philosophical principles about the significance of disagreement are extremely practically relevant. [Part III](#) discusses the relevance of disagreement in moral principles or values for political philosophy and political decision-making.

[Parts II](#) and [III](#) of the book focus on the first-order *normative* work that moral disagreement might do in ethics and applied ethics, political philosophy, and applied epistemology. [Part I](#) is *descriptive*. It is about how we can best explain and interpret moral disagreement. Metaethical theories are

descriptive theories. They aim to give descriptive accounts of our moral judgments, moral thought, and moral language: they aim to give accounts that fit well with what our actual moral judgments, thought, and language is like. For instance, in metaethics there is a debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists. Cognitivists hold that moral judgments are beliefs, they aim to represent or fit the way the world is. Non-cognitivists hold that moral judgments are not belief-like states but are desire-like states such as intentions, plans, or approvals or disapprovals. This debate is about which view of the nature of our moral judgments most accurately describes our moral judgments and the features that they have. For instance, non-cognitivists argue that it is impossible to sincerely judge that you're morally required to take some action without being motivated to take that action: if you think you have a duty to go on strike, you must be to some extent motivated to strike; moral judgments always come with a degree of motivational force. If this description of moral judgments is correct, it counts in favour of non-cognitivism, which holds that moral judgments are constituted by motivational states such as intentions, plans, or desires. [Chapters 2–4](#) discuss how descriptive facts about the amount and types of disagreements in moral principles and values that we find have philosophical implications.

Objectivists about morality hold that there are objective moral facts and truths that outstrip what we or our societies currently think is morally right and wrong. [Chapters 2](#) and [4](#) discuss arguments from moral disagreement against objectivism. According to these arguments, in order to best explain or interpret the moral disagreements that we find within and across different countries and cultures we must reject objectivism. However, non-objectivist views about the nature of morality also face problems with their ability to make sense of disagreements: objectivists argue that these views struggle to accommodate the fact that we do in fact engage in moral disagreements. [Chapter 3](#) discusses whether if we are non-objectivists, we can adequately describe ourselves as engaging in moral disagreements.

[Part II](#) of the book focuses on *personal justification*: what we are justified in believing and doing as individuals and how moral disagreement can impact on this. [Chapter 5](#) discusses a general issue in epistemology: whether finding ourselves in a disagreement about an issue with a cognitive equal should lead us to change our beliefs about that issue or can alter what we can justifiably believe or know about that issue. According to an interesting set of views, finding ourselves in such disagreements does alter what we can be justified in believing. [Chapter 6](#) discusses the implications of these views for what we can know and should believe about a variety of controversial moral issues including distributive justice, animal rights, and abortion. This chapter is about *applied epistemology*: the implications that particular epistemological principles have for what we should believe and can know about particular topics. [Chapter 7](#) discusses how moral disagreement can have implications for