Disagreement in Ethics

Deep Disagreements

Freiburg, 7–9 July 2016

Preliminary Programme

Thursday, July 7

15.00–15.15 **Geert Keil, Ralf Poscher:** Introduction

15.15–16.30 **Folke Tersman:** Levels of Disagreement

17.00–18.15 **Stephan Padel:** The Nature and Epistemology of Moral Disagreement

Friday, July 8

09.30–10.45 **Matthias Mahlmann:** How Deep is Deep Disagreement in Ethics?

11.00–12.15 **Daniel Cohnitz:** Moral Realism and Faultless Disagreement

14.15–15.30 **Anna Bergqvist:** Disagreement, Content and Context: Lessons from Particularist Moral Realism

15.45–17.00 **Michael Moore:** Moral Agreement and Moral Objectivity

17.15–18.30 **Kevin Toh:** Disagreement and Coordination

Saturday, July 9

09.30–10.45 **Gerhard Ernst:** Objective Ethical Relativism. A Polemic Defense of an Irenic View

11.00–12.15 **David Enoch:** Is Moral Disagreement Politically Special?

Abstracts

Folke Tersman: Levels of Disagreement

By the phrase 'deep disagreements' some philosophers refer to disagreements where the opponents disagree not only about the truth of the target claim but also about how to acquire evidence in the relevant domain. The opponents are furthermore supposed to lack dispute-independent ways of settling those background disputes. The purpose of my paper is to examine the idea that the occurrence of deep moral disagreements provide a special problem for moral realists and those who think we may have justified beliefs about moral issues.

Stephan Padel: The Nature and Epistemology of Moral Disagreement

Many philosophers take a deep interest in the phenomenon of disagreement but it's particularly epistemologists and metaethicists that work on the subject. Their respective primary interest concerns different aspects: while epistemologists are mainly interested in the epistemic significance of disagreement, metaethicists typically debate how to best explain the fact that there is a lot of moral disagreement. Moreover, some metaethical theories have implications with regard to what a moral disagreement is. Accordingly, what I call the 'nature of moral disagreement' is also under discussion in metaethics.

Even though both debates continue to thrive and give rise to more and more sophisticated views in epistemology and metaethics, both discussions have been relatively ignorant of each other: Epistemologists have not been impressed by the fact that the nature of moral disagreement is under discussion in metaethics. Instead, they have just held fixed the traditional view of what a disagreement is and worked with that. Metaethicists, on the other hand, failed to take into account important epistemological aspects of disagreement when debating the nature of moral disagreement. The result of this is, or so I will argue in this talk, bad.

A quick glimpse across the borders of each debate suffices to see that different views on the nature of moral disagreement have different implications with regard to the epistemology of disagreement and vice versa. In other words: it is easy to see that the nature and the epistemology of disagreement are interdependent. In this talk, I will argue that, even though this interdependency prima facie warrants blaming both epistemologists and metaethicists for ignoring each other, it's a number of views in metaethics, not epistemology, that eventually come out on the short end. Why? Because many accounts of the nature of moral disagreement are, as I will argue, incompatible with a very plausible assumption in (moral) epistemology that should not be given up without excellent argument, namely: the assumption that at least some moral disagreements are epistemically significant in the sense that they constitute evidence against certain moral judgments. The overall aim of the talk is to identify and thereby criticize a number of views of moral disagreement that are inconsistent with this assumption.

Matthias Mahlmann: How Deep is Deep Disagreement in Ethics?

The talks intends to explore whether and if so in which sense there is deep disagreement in ethics. There is no question that there is disagreement in ethics. Less clear is, however, what the reasons for this empirical disagreement actually are. Are the reasons irreconcilable ethical principles of different persons? Or are other reasons to be considered? Is the

pluralism of ethical opinions the last perspective of critical ethical thought? Or are there—at least in some areas—perspectives of universally valid ethical principles? The paper intends to explore these questions to provide elements of an analytical theory of ethical difference and to assess the merits and problems of universalistic practical thought.

Daniel Cohnitz: Moral Realism and Faultless Disagreement

Is moral realism compatible with the existence of moral disagreements? Since moral realism requires that if two persons are in disagreement over some moral question (that has a determinate answer) at least one must be objectively mistaken, it seems difficult to uphold that there can be moral disagreements without fault. I'll look at different ways in which one might nevertheless argue for the compatibility of moral realism with faultless disagreements. I will show that there is an important sense in which the two are incompatible after all, and will elaborate what consequences should be drawn from this result.

Anna Bergqvist: Disagreement, Content and Context: Lessons from Particularist Moral Realism

This essay considers the perspectival nature of evaluative perception in relation to the concept of deep disagreement in ethics, focusing on the Murdoch's distinctive account of value experience for the possibility of a value objectivism and what is sometimes called the 'absolute conception', which is implicit in many contemporary debates about thick evaluative concepts and in discussions of the interrelationship between Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche in the history of philosophy more generally. On my reading of Murdoch, moral perception does not only involve the idea of being attuned to one's environment thanks to cognitive penetration through the concepts that we deploy, but also the claim that one's conceptions of these concepts decisively influence what we see. Moreover, when people disagree about moral questions, their disagreements do not partition cleanly into evaluative and non-evaluative categories; it is rather that the disputants' different worldviews which generate conflicting narratives about the situation. Taking up Iris Murdoch's thoughts on moral vision, I argue that we can nonetheless make good the robust realist claim that the salient concepts of an individual's life-world can be revelatory of value without appeal either to Platonism or value-constitutivism.

Michael Moore: Moral Agreement and Moral Objectivity

The talk charts the relationships between the social facts of agreement/disagreement in moral beliefs, on the one hand, and the metaphysical facts about the objectivity of moral judgments, on the other. Two sets of relations are examined: (1) that between objectivity and disagreements that are irresolvable even in principle; and (2) that between objectivity and ordinary (i.e., in-principle resolvable) disagreements. Two claims are defended with respect to each of these relationships. As to (1), first, that moral objectivity can exist even if there are in-principle irresolvable disagreements in moral beliefs; and second, that even if all moral disagreements were in-principle resolvable, that would not necessarily require moral objectivity. As to (2), first, that the existence of persistent disagreement in moral beliefs need not constitute evidence that morality is not objective, so long as disagreement in moral matters is no greater than it is in scientific matters, or so long as whatever greater susceptibility to disagreement as may exist for moral beliefs, can be satisfactorily explained by facts other than the supposed non-existence of moral objectivity; and second,

that complete agreement in moral beliefs would not constitute objectivity about morality, nor would such agreement necessarily evidence the objectivity of morality.

Kevin Toh: Disagreement and Coordination

In a series of recent papers, Francois and Laura Schroeter (e.g. Schroeter & Schroeter 2009, 2014) have argued that a speaker counts as competent with the meaning of a normative term insofar as (i) the speaker has an intention to coordinate his use of the term in a way that makes best sense of the practice of using the term that has prevailed in his community; and (ii) the speaker's initial understanding of the term does not diverge so radically from those of others in the community as to undermine that coordinating intention. An implication of this view is that two speakers who subscribe to quite different criteria for applying a normative term would still count as expressing the same concept, and hence genuinely disagreeing, as long as each meets the above two conditions for using that term. As it happens, in a prior paper (Toh 2011), I proposed a quite similar account of competence conditions for legal terms in particular. The purpose of the current paper is to take note of the similarities and differences between the two accounts, and to ask whether an account like ours is appropriate for normative terms other than legal terms as the Schroeters have argued.

Gerhard Ernst: Objective Ethical Relativism. A Polemic Defense of an Irenic View

Disagreement in ethical matters seems to be ubiquitous. Given that, many people think that ethical relativism is the most reasonable position to adopt. In this talk I will explain how I agree and how I disagree. In order to do that I will distinguish two independent forms of ethical relativism. While I reject one form, metaethical relativism, I will argue that there are variants of the other form, normative relativism, which are quite plausible. So, ultimately, I will polemically defend an irenic position: (metaethically) objective (normative) ethical relativism.

David Enoch: Is Moral Disagreement Politically Special?

Much discussion in political philosophy—recently and not-so-recently—is impressed with the problem that disagreement, or perhaps disagreement of some specific kind, poses for political legitimacy. The main examples of such disagreements that political philosophers often discuss are disagreements regarding conceptions of the good or comprehensive doctrines, and such disagreements seem to be (at least partly) instances of moral disagreements.

But it's not clear whether moral disagreements are different in politically relevant ways from other disagreements—like purportedly factual ones, such as whether God exists, or more mundanely empirical ones, such as whether human action contributes to global warming. If moral disagreements are not politically special, and if (for instance) moral disagreement about a comprehensive doctrine challenges the legitimacy of political action based on it, then other disagreements are equally challenging for legitimacy—and this does not seem like a plausible result.

In this talk, I outline the (purported) political significance of disagreement, and then draw on metaethical and epistemological discussions of disagreement to see whether moral disagreement is special in politically relevant ways.