Does Deep Moral Disagreement Exist in Real Life?

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Abstract: The existence of deep moral disagreement is used in support of views ranging from moral relativism to the impossibility of moral expertise. This is done despite the fact that it is not at all clear whether deep moral disagreements actually occur, as the usually given examples are never of real life situations, but of some generalized debates on controversial issues. The paper will try to remedy this, as any strength of arguments appealing to deep moral disagreement is partly depended on the fact the disagreement exists. This will be done by showing that some real life conflicts that are intractable, i.e. notoriously difficult to resolve, share some important features with deep moral disagreement. The article also deals with the objection that the mere conceptual possibility renders illustrations of actually happening deep moral disagreements unnecessary. The problem with such objection is that it depends on theoretical assumptions (i.e. denial of moral realism) that are not uncontroversial. Instead, the article claims we need not only suppose deep moral disagreements exist because they actually occur when some intractable conflicts occur. Thus, in so far as to the deep moral disagreement's existence, the arguments appealing to it are safe. But as intractable conflicts can be resolved, by seeing deep moral disagreements as constitutive part of them, we might have to consider whether deep moral

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disagreements are resolvable too. A brief suggestion of how that might look like is given in the end of the paper.

Introduction

"Deep" or "radical" moral disagreement is essentially a situation, in which parties hold incompatible moral values or principles and are thus unable to agree on a given moral issue. Significantly, what makes such disagreement deep is the impossibility to determine who in the disagreement is mistaken. The usual suspects such as fallacious reasoning, cognitive bias, or some other deficiency in the involved parties are out of the picture, as neither of the equally able "reasoners" (often called *epistemic peers*) suffer from it.

In some sub-disciplines of moral philosophy, such as moral epistemology or meta-ethics, this deep moral disagreement is often used in different kinds of arguments, ranging from support of moral relativism to denial of the notion of moral expertise. Further, any such argument presumably draws its strength partly from the fact that such deep moral disagreement exists. Oddly enough, arguments appealing to deep moral disagreements never quote particular instances of deep moral disagreements that *actually happened*. All that is given are intuitive, but nonetheless very general examples, such as debate on moral permissibility of abortion, homosexuality or meat-eating.

The usual explanation behind this is that deep moral disagreement need not actually exist, as the possibility of its existence validates arguments appealing to it well enough (Tolhurst 1987). This reasoning, however, is seriously challenged by objectivist replies, according to which deep moral disagreements do not exist and are also conceptually impossible (Parfit 2011).

The omission of *historical examples*, as I define them in a moment, thus merits skepticism about the existence of deep moral disagreements, and in turn arguments build on it. In this paper, I wish to put such suspicions to rest.

In what follows, I will show that deep moral disagreements do, in fact, exist, although not exactly in the way philosophical literature defines them. I will claim that the best real life instance of deep moral disagreement can be found in some "intractable conflicts" studied by the discipline of *peace and conflict studies*. Intractable conflict is long-lasting, mentally, and sometimes even physically destructive disagreement, which resists every attempt at a successful resolution (Deutsch, Coleman, and Marcus 2006). There are many forms of intractable conflicts and not all have deep moral disagreements in them. Many, however, do and this makes them fine historical examples of deep moral disagreements. My goal, then, is to show the salient features that both concepts share. This will be accomplished in the following manner.

First, I introduce the concept of deep moral disagreement. Second, I provide some illustrations of the arguments appealing to it and mention the fact that these arguments have serious sociopolitical consequences, making it much more important to prove the validity of their starting premise. Whenever possible, I will be bringing attention to the fact that the usual examples of deep moral disagreements are never of actual events, but instead of general moral debates that seem like they are deep. Third, I deal with a possible objection according to which it is unnecessary to prove the actual existence of deep moral disagreement, as the mere possibility validates the conclusions drawn from it. I rebut with objectivist arguments that deny even the mere possibility of deep moral disagreements. Finally, I introduce the concept of intractable conflict and, by exposing its salient features, argue that some of them are the best real life instances of deep moral disagreement. If I am right, philosophers need not worry about whether deep moral disagreements exist, or are possible. However, they will have to lessen their expectations regarding the irresolvability of deep moral disagreements.

1. Deep moral disagreement

In the most recent comprehensive review of the topic of disagreement in general, Ronald Rowland (2021) goes through all popular arguments from disagreement in the fields of (moral) epistemology, meta-ethics, normative

ethics, and political philosophy. Using his review, I want to define deep moral disagreement and start exposing the systematic lack of what I in a moment define as historic examples.

Disagreement, technically speaking, is a situation in which one person beliefs p and the other $\sim p$. An illustration of this, on Rowland's view, is two people disagreeing on what type of taxation policy helps the least well-off in the most effective way. For him, such disagreement is a matter of "non-moral empirical facts," and it can be settled as such (Rowland 2020, 2). In contrast, *moral* disagreements "would survive even if parties to these disagreements agreed on all the relevant non-moral facts and information" (Rowland 2021, 5). With regards to taxation, the parties of moral disagreement do not disagree on what policy should be applied, but on whether it is *just* to apply any taxation policy at all. Moral disagreement boils down to disagreement about moral values and principles, such as individualist vs. collectivist forms of morality. A more formal definition would thus be: moral disagreement is a situation in which one person wants to act according to the moral principle or value m and the other according to some moral principle or value that is incompatible and incommensurable with m (cf. Kekes 1996, chap. 4). But what makes moral disagreement *deep*?

Further on, in the context of epistemology, Rowland considers deep disagreements – for clarity, call them deep *non-moral* disagreements. For non-moral disagreement to be deep, two conditions must be met: (i) parties of disagreement have different ways of assessing evidence and what even counts as evidence, that is, they have different epistemic principles; and (ii) there exists no further (meta)epistemic principle that would settle the disagreement of first-order epistemic principles (Rowland 2021, 116). Rowland, interestingly enough, gives a real-life illustration of this: the disagreement between "old earthers and young earthers." These parties do not even agree on what counts as evidence (the Bible vs. data from radioactive dating), and there is seemingly little they can do about it.

Next, Rowland presents the use of deep non-moral disagreement in epistemological theorizing. Namely, he considers what are the implications of deep non-moral disagreement for confidence of our beliefs. On the *conciliationist* view, (non-deep) disagreement serves as higher order evidence of a mistake, forcing the parties involved to lower the confidence of their

respective beliefs.[1] This is not so when disagreement is deep, in which case the *steadfast* view holds: "if we find ourselves in a deep disagreement with another about whether *p*, this does not give us reason to lower our confidence or suspend belief about whether *p*," because this disagreement is explained by the parties' adherence to different epistemic principles and not by a reasoning mistake they made (Rowland 2021, 116). It is also worth noting that Rowland provides a number of illustrations here. I will return to this point later.

Finally, Rowland arrives at deep moral disagreement. It is worth quoting him at length.

> There seem to be some important moral epistemological implications of this view. At least some, perhaps many, disagreements about the moral status of abortion and homosexuality are deep. For some people believe that abortion and homosexuality are wrong on biblical or religious grounds. Those who disagree and do not form moral beliefs on the basis of biblical or religious interpretation find themselves in a deep disagreement about the morality of homosexuality and abortion. So neither party to these deep moral disagreements have the justification of their moral beliefs defeated or undermined by these deep moral disagreements. (Rowland 2021, 117)

Let me give two comments to this. First, notice how Rowland translates the conditions of deep non-moral disagreement to the sphere of moral disagreements. He portrays a picture, in which some people believe abortion to be wrong on "religious grounds," whereas others disagree, because they "do not form moral beliefs on the basis of biblical or religious interpretation." Thus, they have different moral principles or values.

Furthermore, Rowland adds that because parties have different grounds for their respective moral beliefs, the disagreement they are involved in does not defeat or undermine their respective moral beliefs. For that to be the

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[1]   "If we should believe that there is a substantial division of opinion among our (approximate) epistemic peers regarding whether *p*, then, other things equal, we should suspend belief about whether p or significantly lower our confidence about whether *p*" (Rowland 2021, 89).

case, to repeat, the parties would have to share the grounds for their moral beliefs and there is only one way for them to start sharing the grounds – they must appeal to some moral meta-principle that would determine which of their starting moral principles or values should be abandoned. If that happened, the disagreement would be explained by the fact that one of the parties made reasoning mistake. The problem is, for Rowland, that they are unable to appeal to some moral meta-principle, "since the parties to these disagreements disagree about which principles generate more reliable results" (Rowland 2020, 118). In other words, they do not and *cannot* share the grounds for their respective moral beliefs. Thus, the disagreement stands despite no one being wrong and there is nothing that can be done about it.

In my reading, then, for moral disagreement to be deep, two conditions must be met: (i) parties of disagreement hold incompatible and incommensurable moral principles or values and (ii) there exists no further way of settling the disagreement between moral principles or values.

My second comment concerns the examples of deep moral disagreements that Rowland gives: morality of abortion and homosexuality. After this, he gives one more, stating that "[s]ome disagreements between act-utilitarians and their opponents may also be deep disagreements" (Rowland 2021, 116). Are these good examples of deep moral disagreement?

First off, what makes an example of deep moral disagreement good? At first approximation, an example of any phenomenon should arguably allow us to *grasp* or *get the hand of* what is salient about the phenomenon. We can use closer characterization given by Timothy Williamson in his paper on role of examples in "armchair philosophizing":

> Examples are almost never described in complete detail; a mass of background must be taken for granted; it cannot all be explicitly stipulated. Many of the missing details are irrelevant to whatever philosophical matter are in play. (Williamson 2005, 6)

It is this "philosophical matter," in my estimation, that is supposed to be conveyed by useful examples. But the question now is, what is a "philosophical matter" that is supposed to be conveyed by examples of deep moral disagreements? Or put differently, what do we want from examples of deep

moral disagreement? I believe it is three things: conditions (i), (ii) and the example to be describing *actually existing event* (or *existence condition* for short). When an example of deep moral disagreement meets all three of these "philosophical matters," I shall call it a *historical example of deep moral disagreement*, or *historical example* for short. When an example meets only (i) and (ii), as is most often the case, I shall call it *ahistorical example of deep moral disagreement,* or *ahistorical example* for short.

Are Rowland's examples of deep moral disagreement – morality of abortion and homosexuality – historical? Undoubtedly, there were and still are debates on such issues. But do these debates meet (i) and (ii) too? This, I claim, we cannot know until we analyze their real life instances. Granted, Rowland suggests that from all the disagreements on morality of abortion or homosexuality, only "some" and "perhaps many" are *deep*. But why does he think so? The answer lies, I suppose, in the fact that it is possible to *imagine* they meet (i), (ii) and existence condition at the same time. This answer, however, will not do because there are serious objectivist challenges to it that would first need to be dealt with. I shall spend more time on this in section 3. Before that, let me explain what existence of deep moral disagreements is supposed to imply (and why it matters) by showcasing two different arguments appealing it: one from meta-ethics and the second from moral epistemology.

2. Arguments from deep moral disagreement

Let me start the exposition of arguments from the deep moral disagreement in meta-ethics. Namely, with arguably the most famous argument against moral objectivism: John Mackie's "argument from relativity."

Mackie appeals to the existence of deep moral disagreement[2] in arguing against moral objectivism, a thesis that – to put it in one way – moral

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[2]   Granted, he uses different terminology. But his conclusion that one and the same thing can arouse "radically and *irresolvably*" (Mackie, 1991, 38, emphasis mine) different moral judgments in different people – i.e. people may "iresolvably" disagree about something – leads me to believe he refers to what I defined as deep moral disagreements. See also citations of him below.

values "are not part of the fabric of the world" (Mackie 1991, 15, see also 29-30). If the values were objective, the argument goes, we would see agreement in people's "ways of life" more often. However, we do not observe much of this agreement. Mackie asks why.

One possible answer is to say that there are "very general basic principles which are recognized at least implicitly to some extent in all society," and which then "married with differing concrete circumstances […], will beget different specific moral rules" (Mackie 1991, 37). Essentially, the reply goes, people follow the same moral principles, and the only difference is in the way they are deployed in virtue of their circumstances. This reply, however, is not enough for Mackie, as he does not believe this is what actually happens in life: universal moral principles "are very far from constituting the whole of what is actually affirmed as basic in ordinary moral thought." Instead, what (Mackie claims) actually happens in life is that

> people judge that some things are good or right, and others are bad or wrong, not because […] they exemplify some general principle for which widespread implicit acceptance could be claimed, but because something about those things arouses certain responses immediately in them. (Mackie 1991, 37-8)

The second possible answer as to why there is not much agreement according to Mackie is the claim that many disagreements can also be seen in science. Disagreements there, however, do not lead us to refuse objectivity. Mackie's rejoinder is simple: when disagreements occur in the sciences, they can be easily explained by showing that some mistakes in the research process were made. However, Mackie continues, "it is hardly plausible to interpret [deep] moral disagreement in the same way," where the "causal connection" is the exact opposite: people approve of monogamy because they participate in it, not vice versa (Mackie 1991, 36). The conclusions come before the hypotheses are formulated, so to say.

Thus, Mackie's belief that irresolvable differences among societies and individuals are best explained by refusing the notion that moral values are objective and instead accepting the relativity of values. But notice how the whole of Mackie's argumentation just assumes deep moral disagreements exist, or as he puts it: "[t]he argument from relativity has as its premiss the

well-known variation in moral codes" (Mackie 1991, 36, emphasis mine). However, what, if pressed, would Mackie cite as a source or evidence for this premise? Besides passing remark on moral code's variation being a "fact of anthropology," nothing else is said.

His example, if we may call it so, does arguably meet *existence condition*, but we do not know if "variation in moral codes" is a result of (i) and (ii) also. The mentioned "fact of anthropology" would help us to determine it. Unfortunately – and unsurprisingly –, Mackie does not quote any anthropological or ethnographic studies. Let me now move to another example.

In her contribution to *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* series, Sarah McGrath considers "whether and to what extent moral disagreement undermines moral knowledge" (McGrath 2008, 87). Despite using a different terminology, she has in mind what I am calling deep moral disagreement. She terms a belief that is a subject of deep moral disagreement a (capital) "CONTROVERSIAL"[3] belief, defining it in a following way: "belief is CONTROVERSIAL if and only if it is denied by another person of whom it is true that: you have no more reason to think that he or she is in error than you are" (McGrath 2008, 91). This is, however, different from (lower case) "controversial" belief, which she defines as "hotly contested" questions, such as morality of death penalty, abortion[4], meat-eating or charity-giving

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[3]   She, not entirely helpfully, uses in her text "CONTROVERSIAL" in capitals as technical term and "controversial" in lower case as everyday adjective.

[4]   Connected to this is one rather anecdotal proof of my point, which merits attention. It is located in Nicholas Sturgeon's 1994 paper where he problematizes the connection between moral disagreement and moral relativism. In analyzing "unsettleable issues," i.e. deep moral disagreements, he searches for examples: "Consider an example Foot and Wong both give of an unsettleable issue, that of the permissibility of abortion." He however hesitates to use it, claiming "this would not be my example, since I regard the permissibility of at least early abortions as quite settleable." He nevertheless accepts it in the end: "but since I do admit unsettleable questions, let me use their example for the sake of discussion" (Sturgeon 1994, 94). It is as if it did not really matter what example of moral disagreement we use, as long as we *assume* it is deep. That is, as long as we assume (i) and (ii). The problem is, as I argue in section 3, we are not justified – at least not uncontroversially – in assuming the existence condition in equal manner.

(McGrath 2008, 92-3). It follows that "controversial beliefs" may be, but need not be, "CONTROVERSIAL." That is, "hotly contested" questions of morality of abortion or meat-eating may be, but need not be, topics of deep moral disagreements. McGrath analyzes whether we can claim knowledge of those topics that are "CONTROVERSIAL."

She proposes a claim: "If one's belief that p is CONTROVERSIAL, then one does not know that p" (McGrath, 2008, 91, emphasis mine). Most importantly, she provides an example. To illustrate CONTROVERSIAL belief, she first asks the reader to imagine that they disagree with a friend, but that the friend has made a mistake. Then she compares that to a different situation: "But *suppose* instead that you have no such reason to think that it is Alice who has made the mistake: as far you know [sic], it is just as likely that you are mistaken as she is," in such case, McGrath concludes, we are not justified in claiming knowledge of the disputed proposition (McGrath 2008, 92, emphasis mine). Unsurprisingly and most importantly for the present study, she asks us only to *suppose* we are in deep moral disagreement. No such actual situation is described. Here, the example is *ahistorical* as it meets (i) and (ii) but not existence condition.

The existence condition would be met by showing that our actual disputes on the permissibility of abortion or meat-eating are CONTROVERSIAL. However, this McGrath does not take for granted: "It is of course much less clear that [controversial moral beliefs] are also CONTROVERSIAL" (McGrath 2008, 93). She proceeds by examining possible ways in which controversial beliefs could be also CONTROVERSIAL, concluding it to be *possible*, but only if we conceive the disagreeing parties as having "relatively wide background of shared moral beliefs," which would suggest they are both equally likely to be right in a dispute on, say, the permissibility of abortion (McGrath 2008, 106).

In sum, McGrath in her consideration of deep moral disagreement and the possibility of moral knowledge does not establish that deep moral disagreements occur, but only that they could, conceptually, occur. Therefore, her examples of deep moral disagreement are also ahistorical.

Before scrutinizing the strategy according to which it suffices for the arguments appealing to deep moral disagreement to establish its conceptual possibility, let me first explain why the validity of such arguments is

important beyond mere intellectual reasons. The matter of fact is, that the conclusions drawn from arguments appealing to deep moral disagreement are serious and consequential for well-being of people. Returning to Mackie, consider his opinion on importance of whether moral values are objective: "It clearly matters for general philosophy. [...] [H]ow this issue is settled will affect the possibility of certain kinds of moral argument" (Mackie 1991, 25). Consider here the classical of whether and who can intervene in situations of human rights abuses. If moral relativism holds, it will be very difficult to defend intervention by appealing to cross-cultural values.

Alternatively, consider the case of McGrath, where deep moral disagreements would lead us to abandon the notion that in morality some people's opinion is above others' in virtue of their expertise (McGrath 2008, cf. 105-6). This is troubling, as such experts are whom we trust with mitigating societal polarization and what today is called "culture wars."

In summary, I presented two arguments appealing to the existence of deep moral disagreement and showed why the validity of these arguments matter. Furthermore, in the process, I have been bringing attention to the fact that all given examples of deep moral disagreement are ahistorical: they are about moral principles or values (i), they are impossible to settle (ii), but none of them are instances of real life disputes (existence condition). This omission merits skepticism towards the validity of arguments appealing to deep moral disagreement. However, there is defense against this omission. Namely, the mere *possibility* of deep moral disagreement validates the conclusions drawn from it. I shall now turn to this defense.

3. Deep moral disagreement as conceptual possibility

The obvious reaction to my claim is as follows. There is actually no need to empirically establish the existence of deep moral disagreement, as its mere conceptual possibility suffices for arguments appealing to it. This strategy is deployed, for example, by William Tolhurst (1987). Let me illustrate his reasoning.

Tolhurst, in a way, combines Mackie and McGrath, as he argues for moral relativism not by denying the existence of objective values, but by arguing they are "epistemically inaccessible," and holding them is thus

never justified (Tolhurst 1987, 611). He does so in a following manner. First, he poses two epistemic principles which state, in short, that people with equal or similar "epistemically relevant features" (i.e. epistemic peers) cannot disagree about "justified objective proposition" (Tolhurst 1987, 611-12).

Next, he adds to a premise that there are situations in which epistemic peers disagree about justified objective propositions. In other words, Tolhurst assumes deep moral disagreements exist. This premise, however, is inconsistent with two stipulated epistemic principles – either the parties of deep moral disagreement are not epistemic peers, or objective proposition they disagree about is not justified. Tolhurst concludes with the former: "no objective moral beliefs are justified" (Tolhurst 1987, 613). Thus, under my terminology, what Tolhurst did was to *assume* or *stipulate* the existence condition. How does he justify this move?

On Tolhurst's view, his "argument does not require any empirical premises concerning the nature and extent of *actual* [deep moral] disagreements, only the assumption that certain sort of moral disagreement is ubiquitously possible" (Tolhurst 1987, 610, emphasis mine). In other words, there is no need to give historical examples in his argument, because its strength lies only in it being "deductively valid" and as long as its premises are "plausible," the validity is secured (Tolhurst 1987, 610).

Is, then, my requirement of historical examples of deep moral disagreement in arguments appealing to it justified? If we can establish something is a conceptual possibility, the arguments we draw from it are, logically speaking, fine enough. After all, this is fairly common practice (not only) in philosophy.[5] It thus seems that existence condition in historical examples is unnecessary, as its conceptual possibility does the job as well. The problem with this, however, is that conceptual possibility of existence condition is "framework-depended" and as such can be seriously challenged. Let me explain.

Say, just like Mackie, we want to give the best explanation of prevailing differences in people's moral principles and values. We wish, to put it differently, to explain why – contrary to the opinions of political philosophers

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[5]   This practice is sometimes called "counterfactual reasoning" and it is for example very popular among so called *compatibilist* in free will debate. See Austin (1979) for a classical illustration.

such as Francis Fukuyama (2006) – there is now seemingly less, not more, *overlap* in people's views on what is morally right. Using a framework of relativism, our claim will be akin to that of Mackie's or Tolhurst's. It need not be, however. Imagine we are not, in fact, using a theoretical framework of relativism, but instead some other. Would then the lack of overlap in people's views on morality be still best explained by them constituting deep moral disagreement? Let me draw on Derek Parfit (2011), perhaps the staunchest defender of moral realism, to answer that question.

Parfit disagrees (pun intended) with the notion that our inability to agree on moral matters is best explained by the fact that they are deep moral disagreements because of his view on the nature of moral claims. On Parfit's account, moral claims, such as "It is permissible to have an abortion" or "It is not right to eat meat," are *propositions* not different from claims expressing physical laws, such as "The speed of sound is approx. 343 m/s" or "Applied force being constant, the smaller the area, the bigger the pressure." This means moral claims can be either true or false in virtue of facts independent on us (Parfit 2011, 391). Were that not so, the notion of being mistaken and, in turn, being able to improve morally, would be completely incoherent (Parfit 2011, 395). They are however not incoherent. Let me illustrate.

Say you think that abortion is never morally permissible because you believe that what results from the combination of sperm and egg holds the same status as a full-fledged person. Next, you encounter Judith Jarvis Thomson's (1971) argument, according to which fetus being a person does not outweigh mother's right to her body. Assume, moreover, you are persuaded by her argument. What happens next? You start to regard your prior belief regarding abortion to be mistaken, as now you believe that at least early-stage abortion is morally permissible.

Thus being "wrong" or "mistaken" is not only very important in our everyday moral lives, but it is also not incoherent. From this it follows, on Parfit's view, that moral claims must be true or false propositions.

But if moral claims are propositions, then in moral disagreement there must always be someone who is mistaken: "When our value judgments express beliefs, which might be either true or false, we can claim that one of two conflicting [moral] judgments must be mistaken" (Parfit 2011, 391).

Recall the definition of disagreement above – one party believes p, the other $\sim p$. The question now is, what moral claims being propositions imply for the conceptual possibility of deep moral disagreement, or of (i) and (ii)? If a person for some reason mistakenly adheres to some moral principles or values, can conditions that we must disagree on morality (i) and there is nothing we can do about it (ii) still hold? Obviously, condition (i) is untouched by moral claims being propositions. But not so with (ii).

On Parfit's account, an "asymmetry" between disagreeing parties is always possible to establish by referencing the reasons for why one of the disagreeing parties is more likely to have got it right. Or as he puts it:

> Since I believe that these other people are mistaken, there is one asymmetry between us. But I cannot rationally have much confidence in my beliefs unless there seems to be some other asymmetry, which would explain why it is these other people, and not me, who have made mistakes. There are often, I believe, such other asymmetries. My main example here will be the person from whom, in several disagreements, I have learned most. Williams was the most brilliant British moral philosopher whom I have known. If there were no other asymmetries between us, I could not rationally believe that it was I, rather than Williams, who was more likely to be right. (Parfit 2011, 430)

In conclusion, then, if one was to explain people's inability to agree on many moral issues not with relativist background, but a realist one, one's conclusion would be completely different. Instead of invoking the notion of deep moral disagreement, which in realist terms is conceptual impossibility as (ii) can never hold, we would concede that there is not much agreement on many issues, but only because many people have faulty judgments. When asked, skeptically, what is our justification for saying that most people are wrong, we could cite the works of Jonathan Haidt (2013) or Eleanor-Gordon Smith (2019), who argue – convincingly, in my estimation – that it is not reasons and facts, but emotions what mainly affects people's opinions on moral issues. In emotional affect, unsurprisingly, it is very difficult to not make a mistake in rational judgment. We could thus explain prevailing

moral disagreements without for a moment assuming deep moral disagreement to be a conceptual possibility.

This is why I consider strategies akin to that of Tolhurst's suspicious. To show his strategy is not controversial, he would first need to defeat Parfit's account of the nature of moral claims (and accounts similar to it) and establish that deep moral disagreement is, in fact, conceptually possible. Until then, it is not safe to just assume (i), (ii) and existence condition hold together. In the final section, I wish to argue we need not only assume it, as historical examples of deep moral disagreements can be given in a form of "intractable conflicts."

4. Some intractable conflicts are historical examples of deep moral disagreements

Merriam-Webster defines (tractable) conflict, in a couple of ways: it is "competitive or opposing action of incompatibles; antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons); mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands." Lastly, to be in conflict could also simply mean "to fail to be in agreement or accord."

One of the most authoritative sources on the subject is *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Deutsch, Coleman, and Marcus 2006). On its outset we are given a vivid description of real life conflict between husband and wife:

> The destructiveness of their way of dealing with their conflicts was reflected in their tendency to escalate a dispute about almost any specific issue (e.g., a household chore, the child's bedtime) into a power struggle in which each spouse felt that his or her self-esteem or core identity was at stake. The destructive process resulted in (as well as from) justified mutual suspicion; correctly perceived mutual hostility; a win-lose orientation to their conflicts; a tendency to act so as to lead the other to respond in a way that would confirm one's worst suspicion; inability to understand and empathize with the

other's needs and vulnerabilities; and reluctance, based on
stubborn pride, nursed grudges, and fear of humiliation, to
initiate or respond to a positive, generous action so as to break
out of the escalating vicious cycle in which they were trapped.
(Deutsch, Coleman, and Marcus 2006, 1)

Intractable conflicts are in many ways similar. Just like tractable conflicts,
they are caused by "moral and identity differences, high-stakes resources,
or struggles for power and self-determination." Intractable conflicts, further,
have also serious consequences for those involved, as they are "often costly
in human and economic terms, and can become pervasive, affecting even
mundane aspects of disputant's lives." But in terms of what differentiates
intractable conflicts from tractable ones, it is resistance to resolution that
is the most salient for intractable conflict (Coleman 2006, 534). The usual
example of conflict that is intractable, is that of Israel and Palestine. I shall
speak more of it in a moment. Let me first compare intractable conflict with
deep moral disagreement.

To repeat, moral disagreement is defined by two conditions: (i) involved
parties disagree about moral principles or values and (ii) there exists no
further way of settling the disagreement between moral principles or values.
Does this definition overlap with that of intractable conflict?

First thing to notice is that not all features of intractable conflict are
present in deep moral disagreement. For example, a disagreement may not
have "high-stakes," and it may not include "struggles for power," but it can
still be deep. Recall Parfit's reference to Bernard Williams. Importantly,
however, the most salient feature of intractable conflict – resistance to res-
olution – is indeed present in deep moral disagreement in the form of (ii).
Further, a conflict's being about "moral and identity differences" is a fea-
ture of deep moral disagreement too, as seen in condition (i). Definitions of
the two notions, then, do not overlap, instead one includes the whole of the
other. Let me give more concrete illustration.

For about last 80 years, there has been a conflict between Jews and
Arabs in the land of historic Palestine. The conflict is very complex and
disputed issues at its core have been changing throughout its history. At
the moment, what is essentially at issue the most, is a question about
whether there should be an internationally recognized Palestinian state next

to the state of Israel (Chomsky 2016). Analyzing this conflict, Donald Ellis (2020) identifies five characteristics that make it immune to resolution: it is (1) existential, meaning it is not about mere material resources, but about morality, human needs, or identity; it involves (2) power difference; (3) outgroup-bias; (4) "extreme emotions"; and (5) incommensurate descriptions of events or "narratives" (Ellis 2020, 184, for last characteristic see esp. 188-89). One way of understanding this list is to take it as a set of conditions for a type of intractable conflict to come about: if (1-5) hold, then conflict is irresolvable, and if it is irresolvable, it is intractable.

Notice that (1) can be easily substituted by (i) as both are essentially about morality. Further, if (i,2,3,4,5) hold, then there is nothing that can be done about this, or (ii). Therefore, if (i,2,3,4,5), then (ii). Deep moral disagreement is what partly constitutes the intractability of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But this relation of inclusion may not always hold, as seen in the next illustration.

In contrast to the Israeli-Palestinian intractable conflict, take recently published case study of effectiveness of third-party mediation in resolving intractable conflicts (Boss et al. 2018). Here, the issue at question was a workplace disagreement in a hospital between a physician Mary and a surgeon Don, the result of which was "difficult working environment" (Boss et al. 2018, 243). Not a word is said about moral values or principles. All the reasons for the conflict were only what we may call pragmatic: Don did not like how Mary handles things and he wanted her replaced. This is why authors of the study omit any mention of morality in their definition of intractable conflicts, which according to the them are "prolonged disputes between two or more parties, which are resistant to constructive resolution efforts, destructive, and long-lasting" (Boss et al. 2018, 235). In terms of (i) and (ii), the intractable conflict between Don and Mary had very little to do with (i), but it still met (ii). What this means is that not all intractable conflicts may involve *moral* disagreements.

We can thus see that deep moral disagreement is sometimes constitutive part of intractable conflict, but not always. Or put differently, all the features of deep moral disagreement are found in *some* intractable conflicts. It follows from this that deep moral disagreements are part of what constitutes some intractable conflicts – Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but one example.

It is worth remarking that this conclusion is in line with conclusions by peace and conflict researchers (Mitchell 2014, chap. 11). In my view, it has been needlessly neglected by philosophical literature.

If I am right, then a new way of presenting historical examples of deep moral disagreements opens itself. To repeat, historical, in contrast to *a*historical examples of deep moral disagreements meet not only conditions (i) and (ii), but existence condition as well. That is, historical examples are not only cases of people being unable to resolve their disagreement on moral principles or values, but they are also *actually existing* cases. I believe many intractable conflicts to be these historical examples. There is a catch, however.

It is not like intractable conflicts are *impossible* to resolve, but rather that it is very difficult to do so. Thus, after 14 years of mediation and dialogue, Mary's and Don's disagreement mentioned above virtually disappeared (Boss et al. 2018). This was by no means an exception. There is other promising research showing successful attempts to mitigate intractable conflicts (Halperin and Pliskin 2015; Kapshuk and Shapira 2022).

What these studies imply, then, is the possibility, or hope, that (1-5) could be mitigated or eliminated. That is, after all, the main aim of conflict resolution strategies. However, does that in turn imply that the part of intractable conflict that is deep moral disagreement, i.e. (i,ii), disappears too? This, I believe, is not clear.

Surely a conflict can be resolved without people stopping deeply disagreeing on morality.[6] This, for example, can be nicely seen in cases of compromise, another conflict resolution strategy. Compromise is "characterized by the fact that disagreeing parties hold on to their opposing views. […] In a compromise, disagreeing parties *agree to* partially concede their claims to the demands of the other party, but they do not *agree with* the other party's demands"[7]

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[6]   I wish to thank Kamila Pacovska for bringing this to my attention.

[7]   Compare this to consensus: "Unlike compromise, consensus requires the parties to a disagreement to change their minds on the controversial issue. If a consensus is achieved, this means that the disagreeing parties consider the agreement to be better than (or at least as good as) their initial positions" (Spang 2023, 2).

Take for instance South African conflict between white minority government, or National Party (NP), and African National Congress (ANC), which resulted in the end of apartheid in 1994. In early 90s, after many concessions by both sides, many of the conflict's features, such as power imbalances, out-group bias or extreme emotions, were mitigated or disappeared completely (Jolobe 2019). This cannot be said of deep moral disagreements between NP and ANC, however. As Zwelethu Jolobe puts it metaphorically in his recent book on the role of international mediation in ending the conflict: "there was no love lost between the [white minority] government and ANC" (Jolobe 2019, 1).

In what way, if any, did NP's and ANC's deep moral disagreement disappear? A proper examination of this question is beyond the scope of the present paper, I shall therefore give only a sketch of an answer I take to be probable.

When deep moral disagreement disappears, it can very well become what we might call *latent*. By being latent, the disagreement is not manifested, but it is disposed to be so. That is, we may not know the disagreement exist, until we bring up the controversial topic. Until we actually ask people what they think. Imagine here all the manifested disagreements when people from the whole of political spectrum get together for, say, Thanksgiving. In light of this, we must reconsider our understanding of (ii), or the fact that people can sometimes do nothing about their moral differences.

At the end of the day, when conflicts are ended, hands shaken and resolutions signed, it is very well possible for deep moral disagreement to not disappear entirely, but instead to take on a new form by becoming latent and moving to the background of everyday life. But surely if people *ignore* their differences, or "live and let live" so to say, then they do, in fact, change something about their disagreement. If this is the case, then the condition that people can do nothing about the disagreement they find themselves in, or (ii), must be interpreted in a different, weaker way. Here is one suggestion: there is nothing people can do about their moral disagreement, but that might one day change. I suspect that by seeing some intractable conflicts as instances of deep moral disagreements, we commit ourselves to this weaker interpretation of (ii). But be that as it may, these considerations in

no way affect the fact that we are now able to illustrate actually existing moral disagreements that are impossible to resolve.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that usually given examples of deep moral disagreements are never of actual events that happened and that this can, and should, be remedied by use of intractable conflicts. Deep moral disagreements are situations in which parties disagree on moral values or principles without having a way to settle the disagreement. On the other hand, intractable conflicts are situations of pervasive disagreements on existential matters that negatively affect involved parties on both emotional and physical level. Most importantly, intractable conflicts are notoriously difficult to resolve.

Deep moral disagreements are appealed to in different kinds of arguments. I mentioned two. The first was meta-ethical. It claimed that prevailing disagreements are best explained by denying the objectivity of moral values. The second illustration came from moral epistemology. It explored the thesis that the existence of deep moral disagreement undermines the possibility of "moral expertise." Both of these arguments draw their strength partly on the fact that deep moral disagreements actually exist. I have been repeatedly showing that evidence, if we may take it as such, given in support of the existence of deep moral disagreement is weak, if not entirely lacking. This evidence takes the form of examples of generalized disagreements, such as debate on permissibility of abortion or morality of meat eating. These moral disagreements do, undoubtedly, occur – but it is not clear why we should, without further analysis of their particular instances, believe they are also deep.

It is sometimes argued that deep moral disagreement need not actually exist, because their conceptual possibility does the job just as well. This line of answer, however, presupposes that moral realism does not hold. That is, that moral claims are not propositions that one gets either right, or wrong. Without further argument against moral realism, then, this line of answer is not satisfactory. Therefore, there is still a good reason to try and find

actually existing deep moral disagreements. I suggested this can be done by looking at what peace and conflict studies call "intractable conflicts."

Some of the features of intractable conflicts – namely them being about morality and difficult to resolve – are also features of deep moral disagreements. This means that when the former occurs, the latter also occurs. If I am right, some intractable conflicts are partly constituted by the fact that people disagree deeply on morality in them. I also mentioned that among social psychologists, this claim is uncontroversial.

Finally, my claim comes with theoretical baggage. If we grant that deep moral disagreements are constitutive part of some intractable conflicts, then we must amend our understanding of deep moral disagreement's impossibility of resolution. This is so, because throughout history many intractable conflicts were resolved, if difficulty. I suggested one interpretation, according to which deep moral disagreements can become hidden, or latent. This most often happens in cases of compromise. Here, it is obviously not the case that people can do nothing about their disagreement. I therefore suggested a weaker interpretation of this condition, according to which there is a possibility that one day, people might be able to do something about their deep moral differences – ignore them, for example.

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