

Applying Moral Caution in the Face of Disagreement

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2. Moral Caution

... It is morally wrong to be flippant about morality. We shouldn't take morality lightly, and so, we should avoid excessive moral risks when we are able. This thought is captured in the following principle:

MORAL CAUTION (MC): Having considered the moral status of doing action A in context C, if (i) subject S (epistemically) should believe or suspend judgment that doing A in C is a serious moral wrong, while (ii) S knows that refraining from doing A in C is not morally wrong, then S (morally) should not do A in C.¹

MC is a bridge principle that connects something that is *epistemically* true of you to something that is *morally* true of you. ... MC is a quite plausible moral principle. The idea that you should not take significant moral risks is quite intuitive, and MC captures this. To further MC's plausibility, consider the following case:

3. Car Crusher

Vlad is visiting a junkyard with a couple of his friends, and has been given the opportunity to operate their car compactor, which crushes cars into much smaller dimensions. After crushing a few cars, Vlad starts to get the hang of it. As he loads the next car into the car compactor Lola, Vlad's friend, screams that her daughter had climbed into the car that Vlad just loaded into the compactor. Marco, Vlad's other friend, claims that he hasn't seen Lola's daughter but that he's quite sure that she isn't in the car.

In this case, Vlad should suspend judgment as to whether Lola's daughter is in the car, and so he should also suspend judgment as to whether it is a serious moral wrong to crush the car without first figuring out whether Lola's daughter is inside. Crushing the car with Lola's daughter inside would be a serious moral wrong. At the same time, Vlad knows that it is morally permissible to not crush the car right now. Vlad may have an urge to watch the car's dimensions drastically diminish, but there is nothing morally wrong with holding off for a bit or not crushing the car altogether. Given these features of the case, it is clear that it would be morally wrong for Vlad to crush the car without first figuring out whether Lola's daughter is inside – without first determining that it would not be a serious moral wrong to crush the car. Put differently, Vlad's epistemic situation needs to change for it to be morally permissible for him to crush the car. It is worth noting that the moral wrongness of Vlad crushing the car does not depend upon whether Lola's daughter is in fact in the car. Regardless of whether Lola's daughter is in the car, Vlad's epistemic situation prevents crushing the car from being a permissible choice at the

¹ Matheson (2016). MC applies to situations where the subject has considered the moral status of a certain action in a context. This is to avoid MC applying in some cases where it might be that the subject is justified in suspending judgment regarding the relevant claim, but the issue has simply never crossed their mind. MC takes no stand on the moral status of actions in such unreflective contexts.

time. What makes crushing the car at that time morally wrong is the epistemic situation that Vlad occupies. There is nothing in general that is morally wrong about crushing broken down cars. In fact, it may be that in general it is a good thing to do since it reduces the amount of wasted space they take up. However, crushing the car at that time would exercise *significant moral risk* for Vlad and would be morally reckless, and that's what makes it morally wrong. Vlad's epistemic context makes an otherwise morally permissible action morally impermissible for him. MC captures this verdict and nicely explains it.² ...

5. Applying Moral Caution

... In what follows I examine three plausible applications of MC: vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving.

5.1 Vegetarianism

Consider the following claim:

V: It is a serious moral wrong to consume meat in this context.

In many contexts, V is quite contentious; V is often in a state of disarray. There are many moral experts who believe V, and there are many moral experts who do not believe V. Many people on either side of the issue are informed, open-minded, and intelligent. Nevertheless disagreement persists. An awareness of this fact makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about V. If we are aware that those best positioned epistemically to determine the truth of V have not been able to collectively determine its truth, then we should suspend judgment about V.

An alternative to eating meat is not eating meat. Unlike with V, here there is no real controversy. Consider the following:

V*: It is morally permissible to not consume meat in this context.

For most contexts in which we find ourselves, V* is uncontroversial. Admittedly, there are some contexts in which not eating meat would cause one to die, and possible contexts where terrorists have threatened to blow up New York City unless you eat a steak, etc. In those contexts, we may be justified in suspending judgment or disbelieving V*, but, those are not contexts we find ourselves in very often. For nearly every context we will find ourselves in, V* will enjoy a kind of consensus. Debates about vegetarianism are typically debates about whether vegetarianism is *morally required*, not debates about whether vegetarianism is *morally permissible*.³

² We can imagine that there are two separate remotes for crushing the car. Vlad has one, and Uri has the other. Suppose that unlike Vlad, Uri does know that Lola's daughter is not in the car. Suppose that Uri crushes the car. While in some sense this is the very action that Vlad performed, Uri's improved epistemic position over Vlad has made all the difference. What Uri does is morally permissible, since in doing so he does not exhibit significant moral risk. 12

For a nice survey of the arguments from moral disagreement to moral skepticism, see Joyce (2017). For more on the particular argument deployed here, see Carey and Matheson (2013), Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Matheson (2009, 2015).

³ For some who see vegetarianism as morally problematic, see Davis (2003) and Zamir (2004).

So, regarding vegetarianism, our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of the debate, for almost all contexts you will find yourself in, you should suspend judgment that eating meat in this context is a serious moral wrong while you know that not eating meat is morally permissible. Given MC, it is morally wrong for you to eat meat in this context. Eating meat would be to exercise significant and unnecessary moral risk, and that's morally wrong. ...

According to the argument advanced here, it is *our current epistemic situation* with respect to the permissibility of the alternative actions that has it that we should not eat meat (in most contexts). This epistemic situation can change, and it can change in ways in which the antecedent of MC would fail to be met. This argument against eating meat (in most contexts) is not (at least directly) about it being morally wrong to so act. Rather, it is the fact that *in our current epistemic context*, doing so would be to take an unnecessarily large moral risk – and taking moral risks like that is morally impermissible. ...

5.2 Abortion

Consider the following claim:

A: It is a serious moral wrong to have an abortion in this context.

In many contexts, A is quite controversial; A is often in a state of disarray. There are many moral experts who believe A, and there are many moral experts who disbelieve A. Many on each side of this debate are intelligent, open-minded, and informed; nevertheless they disagree. An awareness of this fact makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about A. If we are aware that those best positioned to determine the truth of A have not collectively been able to figure it out, then we should suspend judgment about A.

However, an alternative to having an abortion is not having an abortion, and in many contexts this is uncontroversially permissible. Consider the following:

A*: It is morally permissible to not have an abortion in this context.

For many contexts it is uncontroversial that A* is true. Of course, there are some contexts where A* is clearly false or is at least sufficiently controversial. Cases where the mother's life is in jeopardy or the fetus's well-being is significantly impaired are contexts where A* is controversial. However, many contexts where an abortion is being considered are not like that. The debate about abortion is typically about whether abortion is *morally permissible*, not whether it is *morally required*.⁴

So, regarding abortion our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of the debate, for many contexts, we should suspend judgment about whether having an abortion in this context is a serious moral wrong while we know that not having an abortion is morally permissible. Since the antecedent of MC is met in such contexts, it is morally wrong to have an abortion in such contexts. ...

⁴ Benatar (2008) is a notable exception.

5.3 Charitable Giving

Consider the following claim:

C: It is a serious moral wrong to not give more to charity in this context.

In many contexts C is quite controversial amongst the relevant experts. C is often in a state of disarray. There are many open-minded, intelligent and informed individuals who believe C, and many who do not. An awareness of the fact that C is in a state of disarray makes it reasonable to suspend judgment about C.

However, an alternative to C is rather uncontroversial.

C*: It is morally permissible to give more to charity in this context.

For almost all contexts we will find ourselves in, C* enjoys some kind of consensus. Sure, there are some possible contexts where giving any more to help those in need would put one's family in real jeopardy or would sacrifice one's own well being in a morally significant way, and in such cases it may be reasonable to suspend judgment or disbelieve C*. But, such contexts are quite rare (at least for those reading this paper). Nearly every context we will find ourselves in will be one in which C* is uncontroversially true. The debates about our responsibilities to those in poverty are typically about whether it is morally wrong to *not* give more, not whether it would be morally wrong to give any more than we have already given.⁵

So, here too our epistemic asymmetry is met. Given an awareness of the state of debate, for almost all contexts we will find ourselves in, we should suspend judgment that not giving more is a serious wrong, while we know that it is morally permissible for us to give more. For almost all contexts the antecedent of MC is met on this issue, so in those contexts it is morally wrong for us to not give more.

A strength of this argument is that it establishes its conclusion without relying on any controversial consequentialist premise that may be feared to overgeneralize. It is often wondered regarding charitable giving, 'where do we draw the line?' MC comes with an answer to that question that is more moderate than many extant answers, though it remains quite demanding. In Singer's classic argument, the line is drawn at a level of marginal utility, where giving more would cause oneself harm comparable to the harm one would be preventing.⁶ In contrast, MC draws the line where it would be contentious whether giving more in that context is morally wrong. It will become contentious that giving more is wrong much earlier than the line of marginal utility. However, this is not to say that the application of MC does not have dramatic moral consequences here. While more moderate than other arguments about charitable giving, MC is still quite demanding. Most people would have to give quite a lot before it would become contentious that giving any more is a serious moral wrong. ...

⁵ Hobson (2016) is perhaps an exception here.

⁶ Singer (1972). Singer also gives a more moderate line, where giving more would sacrifice something of significant moral value. We will examine a parallel version of MC below.

6. Objections

6.3 Moral Progress

... While some may find (at least some of) the applications above quite troubling, the worry here is that there are even *more troubling* applications of MC. To see such troubling applications we need only envisage an intellectual context where the moral experts are seriously confused about the morality of some action. For instance, we can imagine a situation where it is highly controversial whether interracial marriage is a serious moral wrong.⁷ Remaining single appears to be a clearly permissible alternative to marrying, so we can imagine a case where our subject is thinking about entering an interracial marriage. He recognizes that the moral experts he knows of are in a state of disarray about the morality of interracial marriage, and he knows that remaining single is a morally permissible alternative. MC thus seems to have it that it would be morally wrong for him to enter into this interracial union. Since we know that there is nothing morally wrong with interracial relations, this may strike us as the wrong verdict and a decisive counterexample to MC. Recall that MC renders its moral verdicts not by finding anything inherently morally wrong with the action in question, but by identifying it as a significant and unnecessary moral risk. MC can *restrict* the range of morally permissible alternatives, and this seems to be exactly what is going on in the imagined scenario.⁸

There are two lines of response to this objection: *the hardline response* and *the moderate response*. The hardline response simply bites the bullet. Since MC is a morally restrictive principle, there will be cases where otherwise permissible actions are made impermissible due to the fact that they would exhibit problematic moral risk. This is unfortunate, but some unfortunate things are true. What MC points out, is that our intellectual context is incredibly important. In impoverished intellectual contexts there will be unfortunate consequences – acts that would otherwise be permissible can be rendered impermissible. This consequence highlights the importance of good ethical thinking. Since the state of our intellectual community has ramifications for which actions are morally permissible, the state of the intellectual community is of great importance.⁹ The ramifications of a bad intellectual community are not purely epistemic, there can be bad *moral* consequences as well (e.g. otherwise permissible actions made impermissible). Bad intellectual contexts can come with *moral* harms, and sometimes intellectual change must precede moral change. Returning to Car Crusher, Vlad's epistemic situation needed to improve before certain actions opened up to him as morally permissible alternatives. Just as there can be moral victims of a bad political arrangement, so too can there be moral victims of a bad intellectual arrangement.¹⁰ In both cases,

⁷ This follows an objection examined in Matheson (2016).

⁸ It is important to not make this putative counterexample too easy. In order for MC to be met, it is important that the community that believes that interracial relations are morally wrong are not simply those in power, but that our subject is justified in believing that they are in the best epistemic position to determine the truth of the matter. So, the intellectual contexts that most quickly come to mind are not likely to satisfy MC. If our subject has a justified error theory about why the majority has the moral beliefs that they do, MC will not apply. For more on this point, see Bergmann (2009) and Sherman (2014).

⁹ For more on this point see Fricker's (2007) discussion of bad epistemic circumstantial luck.

¹⁰ Perhaps this is a new kind of epistemic injustice. See Fricker (2007).

we should strive to make changes at the relevant level, and until those changes are made the problems will persist. This is the hardline response.¹¹

According to the moderate response, MC should be slightly weakened. Consider the following amended principle:

WEAK MORAL CAUTION (WMC): Having considered the moral status of doing action A in context C, if (i) subject S (epistemically) should believe or suspend judgment that doing A in C is a serious moral wrong, while (ii) S knows that refraining from doing A in C is not morally wrong and *is of no significant moral cost to the agent*, then S (morally) should not do A in C.¹²

WMC adds the clause “and is of no significant moral cost to the agent” to condition (ii) of MC. This amendment has it that exercising moral caution does not require the agent to sacrifice anything of significant moral value. If refraining from doing A in C would require S to sacrifice something of significant moral value, WMC simply does not apply. So, this amendment to moral caution decreases its demandingness. In the above scenario regarding interracial marriage, WMC does not offer any prescriptions. While there is undoubtedly vagueness surrounding what counts as a significant moral cost, there are nevertheless clear cases. Getting precise on what counts as a significant moral cost will be important in determining borderline cases, but many cases will have clear application without being precise here. For instance, not entering a meaningful interracial relationship would be a significant moral cost on any plausible unpacking of the concept. As such, WMC does not give any prescriptions in the above case and thus avoids the uncomfortable consequences that MC has in the envisioned scenario. Moving to WMC from MC thus avoids the uncomfortable result altogether.¹³

One might worry here that such a move also takes away the substantive consequences of exercising moral caution regarding vegetarianism, abortion, and charitable giving. Let’s consider the three applications in turn. Regarding vegetarianism, adding the condition that the action in question is of no significant moral cost to the agent does not appear to significantly affect the application of moral caution. It may be argued that not eating meat in certain religious or cultural contexts would be a significant moral cost, but even if so, many contexts will still be such that it is morally wrong to eat meat. In most scenarios, not eating meat on the occasion would not be of significant moral cost to the agent on any plausible construal of ‘significant moral cost’. Regarding charitable giving, the weakened principle has a less extensive application, but the application is still quite significant.¹⁴ Most readers can give a substantial amount of their resources without having to sacrifice something of significant moral value. Regarding abortion, the move to WMC does appear to significantly alter the application of moral caution. It is plausible that utilizing your body to grow another organism does come with

¹¹ It is also worth noting that MC is not alone in this consequence, both CF and MRM leave open the possibility of such a scenario obtaining.

¹² Rowland (2017) suggests a similar clause be added to MC. Rowland’s suggestion is ‘and refraining from doing A would not be extremely costly’.

¹³ See Guerrero (2007) for a similar qualification.

¹⁴ The weakening of moral caution mirrors Singer’s (1972) more moderate version of his principle regarding charitable giving. As Singer notes there, even such a moderate principle has quite significant ramifications.

significant moral cost to the agent. So, regarding abortion, WMC does appear to have a more limited application than MC. Even so, WMC does offer to shift the debate about the permissibility of abortion to a debate about what counts as a significant moral cost.¹⁵

So, there are two routes of response to the worry about moral progress. On either response, exercising moral caution will still have significant consequences for what it is morally permissible to do. Even weakening MC to WMC comes with significant consequences for how we should live our lives.

7. Conclusion

It is quite plausible that we should exercise moral caution. While the claim that it is morally wrong to exercise significant moral risk may initially seem trivial and uninteresting, an appreciation of the epistemic significance of disagreement reveals that such a principle has striking implications. I have argued that the principle of moral caution has it that we should not eat meat (in most contexts), and refrain from giving more to charity (in most contexts). Its consequences for the abortion debate will depend upon which version of moral caution is correct.

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¹⁵ One might worry that a liability of WMC is that it does not come with an explicit account of what a significant moral cost is. Rather than a liability, this is an asset. Just as MC accommodated disparate accounts of epistemic justification, WMC can accommodate disparate accounts of significant moral cost. While borderline cases will not be settled without an explicit account, many of the applications examined here are not plausibly borderline cases of significant moral sacrifice. See also Guerrero (2007) on this point.

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