What’s So Great About Being Open-Minded?

It is a cultural truism that being open-minded is, in general, a good thing, and that, in particular, it tends to lead an individual, or a culture, from ignorance to knowledge. This essay has two aims: ultimately, to show that, when it comes to ethics, there is nothing to vindicate open-mindedness over its rival, closed-mindedness; along the way, I argue for an oft-assumed but rarely-defended thesis which is critical to my case: the claim that it is possible for two parties to disagree on ethical matters, where that disagreement cannot be attributed either to irrationality, or to ignorance of the non-moral facts, on either side.

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1. The idea that “It’s good to be open-minded” would, I think, count as a cultural truism—a bromide really. What I should like to argue in the following is that, given certain widely held assumptions, open-mindedness—at least as it pertains to morality—is not obviously a virtue. It is not a vice, either; but it has nothing to recommend itself over its rival, closed-mindedness.

   It is worth distinguishing at the outset two senses of ‘open-mindedness’. On the one hand, the term may denote a civic virtue; on the other, a moral or intellectual one. Open-mindedness in the first sense is the virtue, roughly, of being sociable; of listening to other people and engaging with their arguments, on pain of being uncivil, or unkind, or brutish, or unsociable. It might be said, of this sense of the term, that “the virtue is its own reward.” But perhaps it is further recommended—to put it crudely—by its tendency to increase comity among people, even to make physical confrontation less likely.

   Understood in its intellectual sense, the merits of the virtue are rather different: ‘open-mindedness’ is supposed to lead its bearers from misapprehension and error to the truth. Thus it is widely supposed, I think, that an open-minded culture will also be one which is, all other things being equal, more likely to be correct on all sorts of matters—moral matters included.
The reverse is perhaps more widely believed: that a closed-minded culture is *ipso facto* more likely to be wrong in its moral views; or in any case, more likely to persist in its error.¹

Within the intellectual sense, it is possible to make a further distinction, sc., between a general open-mindedness; and a narrow, specifically ethical sort of open-mindedness. The former could be characterized as openness to the possibility that one is either missing some relevant (non-moral) fact, or else is committed to contradictory propositions; the latter properly concerns whatever open-mindedness remains when we subtract the former sort. I say more about what this consists in below (§8), but I think the reader will find it perfectly familiar; it involves, in the first place, a willingness to entertain the possibility that one is wrong, even where that possibility does not consist in the possibility of ignorance of fact, or of outright inconsistency—or, where it does not consist in a mistake which could characterized party-neutrally (if that is something different).

My contention will be that, in moral matters, it is not true that it is better to be open-minded, in the narrow, intellectual sense, than to be closed-minded—that open-mindedness (in this sense) is not a virtue after all. These conclusions tend also, I shall suggest, to undermine the plausibility that even the civic version is any kind of virtue—but that is by the way. My main concern in this essay will be with the ‘intellectual’ sense of the virtue, and I shall be referring to it in what follows.

2. One way to bring out the point rather simply is to consider an analogy with the vice of priggishness. I take it that ‘priggishness’ refers to a kind of untoward moral censoriousness, one with which we are all familiar. And yet, it is equally familiar that we do not regard all censure as untoward: both for pragmatic, and for other, quite un-pragmatic reasons, we regard many actions

¹ The slide between the last two characterizations, as we shall see, is crucial.
as meriting censure—some, very severe censure, in fact. Reflection on such actions discourages, I think, the thought that we might mark off priggishness from moral righteousness (or whatever we choose to call it) merely by the amount of censure displayed. On the contrary, someone is priggish just when he is censorious to a degree that is not merited by the object of his censure, or in a way that is out of proportion, as we sometimes put it.

This is a of course a classic mark of virtue and vice terms: their definitions very commonly include restrictions like ‘the proper amount’ or ‘what is called for’, restrictions which preclude a ‘mechanical’ deployment of such terms. Nothing about this feature makes such terms undeployable, of course; there is, in many cases anyway, large-scale agreement about what constitutes ‘the proper amount’. But this feature poses a problem for the (putative) virtue of open-mindedness: what would the analogous restriction be? It may not, after all, seem to be a particularly virtuous thing to be open to arguments for (say) race-hatred; so it is not as though the virtue of open-mindedness might consist in openness to any views, or the arguments for them. For the same reasons it might be felt rather doubtful that there is some correct ‘amount’ (in any mechanical sense) of (say) intellectual attention that we ought to pay to someone else’s view, or his argument, independent of the content of that view. The only workable idea, I think it will emerge, will be that one should be open-minded about views that are morally good, but different from ours, but closed-minded towards views—and arguments for those views—which are morally bad (and different from ours). Of course it is quite obvious that this sort of definition empties the term (‘open-minded’), not of any content, perhaps, but surely of most of its use: it

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2 A familiar Aristotelian point; cf. Nichmachean Ethics 1109b et passim.
3 Though some have thought there is a problem here: see McKeever and Ridge, Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal, pp. 140-152.
4 We might equally reflect on the vice-term; the considerations are parallel.
5 Perhaps some readers will deny this; the arguments for it are below.
6 More sophisticated definitions are available, but they will amount to the same thing, and face the same problem; see §3.
would be pointless, e.g., to inculcate such a virtue in our children—utterly redundant; we might tell them to simply “believe only the true moral statements” and leave it at that.

One way to put the thought to which these, admittedly sketchy, remarks have been pointing, is this: ‘open-mindedness’, on this construction, is, like ‘moral righteousness’, a kind of second-order virtue, insofar as correct resolution of disputes over its application will turn on the answers to prior and independent moral disputes. Just as whether or not one really is being a prig depends on just how bad the action which he is censuring is; just so, whether or not one is ‘open-minded’ in any laudable sense will depend on the nature of the view he is being asked to consider. And therefore one could not rebuke a man for being closed-minded until one had some definite opinion of the value or merit of the view to which he was closing his ears. The only remaining alternative will be to give up on open-mindedness as a virtue altogether.

3. Or so I shall argue. The issue can in any case be put more precisely if we consider first the following two abstract possibilities for the nature of moral disagreement. On the one hand, we find the idea that there is always—what we might call—a position-neutral method of adjudication between any two positions; and on the other, the rejection of that idea.

I think it would be fair to say that, with the important exception of certain Kantians, most moral philosophers in the analytic tradition have rejected the idea—or anyway, could be brought to object to it. In fact many have subscribed to a fairly strong rejection of that idea, a principle which I shall call ‘Stevenson’s Law’, since it was C.L. Stevenson who formalized one important version of it. Stevenson famously insisted that any picture of ethics would have to

7 See Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” pp. 16-18. My formulation, below in the text, is, in effect, a combination of the first and second of Stevenson’s “requirements” on the sense of ‘good’. On the other hand, Stevenson was far from the first to have recognized something like this principle: it has deep connections with Hume’s ‘Law’, and Moore’s point about the ‘naturalistic fallacy’—with which latter, indeed, Stevenson himself connects it. It is also a close relative of Blackburn’s principle E—see his “Moral Realism,” pp. 116-118.
accommodate the following (supposedly) manifest fact about the area: the fact that it is always possible for two people to disagree about ethical matters without disagreeing about any non-ethical matters, and without thereby manifesting any irrationality (in the thin sense: i.e., not contradicting themselves). Or, in a slightly different formulation: it is always possible for two fully rational individuals who are informed about all the relevant non-moral facts to nevertheless make opposing moral judgments.

The relevance of Stevenson’s Law to the avowed topic of this paper is this. If the Law is false, then open-mindedness in the general sense outlined above will be enough to bring everyone, eventually, to consensus—more (barring certain absurd possibilities) to the correct moral view. But if the Law is true and if, moreover, it is said that we ought nevertheless to be open-minded in the more particular sense; if so, then what is being recommended is a disposition which is no more likely to drive us from a bad view to a good one than from a good view to a bad one. The connection—between Stevenson’s Law and open-mindedness—is this: Stevenson’s Law tells us that position-neutral facts are not sufficient to secure consensus; narrow open-mindedness is, in effect, the disposition of being open to views which could not possibly be justified position-neutrally or (more to the point) on any grounds we now accept. It is this feature that makes open-mindedness a recipe for the corruption of our moral views (if, equally, an instrument for their correction), and thus renders it a virtue of dubious merit.

As I have said, if Stevenson’s Law is true, then it is evidently not the case that there will always be a position-neutral method of adjudicating any moral dispute. On the contrary, for any particular moral conviction, or constellation of such convictions, there will always be a

Stevenson, of course, used the principle to motivate an emotivist view of ethical terms; but there has been no consensus about whether or not emotivism, or any sort of anti-realism, is forced on us by the Law. The debate over whether or not it does lives on, often in confused terms, in the debate over ‘moral disagreement’—a debate that has gone on, more or less continuously, for the duration of analytic ethics. See below in the text.
(conceivable) opposed conviction, between the two of which there can be no position-neutral method of resolution: by hypothesis, no program of amassing non-moral facts, nor any investigation for ‘hidden contradictions’, will settle the dispute.

Of course there may be non-neutral methods of adjudication. By Jones’s lights, Smith’s pattern of moral reasoning—the moral judgments he makes on the basis of some set of non-moral facts—may appear illegitimate or indeed even bizarre. But of course the feeling may well be mutual. (I return on this point below.)

I believe, as I say, that many philosophers have accepted Stevenson’s Law.\(^8\)

Nevertheless, in what follows, I shall be trying to motivate it independently. My aim of course will be to underwrite certain claims about open-mindedness. But a vindication of Stevenson’s Law would be interesting for independent reasons, not least because of the role the Law has played, however subterraneously, in discussions of moral disagreement. Thus it has often been asked whether a non-skeptical moral realism is compatible with pervasive moral disagreement; whether we can expect convergence in ethics, and, if not, what this means for such a realism; and, a little more distantly, what the various, supposedly dubious, origins of our moral beliefs entail for our confidence in them, or more generally for moral realism.\(^11\) These discussions

\(^8\) Blackburn also suggests that his (very similar) principle E has been widely accepted (“even more commonly believed than ... supervenience”): see “Moral Realism,” p. 116.

\(^9\) See, e.g., Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values”; Brink, “Moral Realism and Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness”; Shafer-Landau, “Ethical Disagreement, Ethical Objectivism, and Moral Indeterminacy”; Sher, “But I Could Be Wrong”; and Cohen, “Paradoxes of Conviction,” Chapter 1 of his *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich*. To my mind the clearest discussion is still to be found in William Tolhurst’s “The Argument from Moral Disagreement.” The aim of the present paper is in some sense to reverse some of the conclusions of Cohen’s chapter. Cohen’s reflections on the nature of deep disagreement—in ethical, but also other domains—leads him to question our confidence in such beliefs. I am, in effect, accepting Cohen’s major premise about deep disagreement—sc., that it is possible and in fact common—and asking what follows if our confidence remains undiminished.

\(^10\) See Chapter 8 of Williams’s *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*; for a more sanguine view, see McDowell’s “Values and Secondary Qualities” (especially p. 145 and fn. 45) and his “Critical Notice” of Williams’s book (especially pp. 378-80).

\(^11\) See, e.g., Singer, “Ethics and Intuitions” and Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value.”
sometimes focus, mistakenly I think, on the question of the actual prospects of attaining moral agreement (or achieving convergence). Whatever the issue in the area is, it cannot be this; for our optimism about actual convergence must turn, inevitably, on our (empirical) views about, e.g., the degree to which people are conformity-seeking; the inevitability of the triumph of Westernized capitalism; and the prospects for a suitably-advanced brainwashing technology. None of these views could possibly have any import for the coherence of realism about ethics.\(^\text{12}\)

The important question in the area, I think, is not whether or not everyone will agree on ethical matters “at the end of inquiry,” but whether or not Stevenson’s Law is true—whether or not it is possible for two people to agree on all the non-moral facts, but disagree about the moral facts, while remaining rational, in a thin sense.\(^\text{13}\)

—Why a ‘thin sense’? The difficulty here is that if we allow the term ‘rational’ to be used in any ‘moralized’ sense, Stevenson’s Law will turn out to be trivially false. After all, if someone counts as irrational whenever (e.g.) he draws the wrong moral conclusion from the relevant non-moral facts, then of course it will be impossible for two rational, fully-informed people to disagree about ethics—surely an unexciting proposition.

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\(^\text{12}\) Traditionally, ‘realism’ about ethics has been understood as the view that a) ethical propositions are bivalent and b) at least some of them are true. Some theorists add a third restriction, sc., the denial of subjectivism and relativism. The notion that a non-skeptical moral realism requires that convergence be (in some sense) possible is apparently generated by the intuition that, if some (say) set of moral judgments (a moral view) is not demonstrable to any comer, then either no one can claim to know it, or we must abandon realism (on pain of a thoroughgoing skepticism). It’s not clear to me that the motivating intuition just mentioned is any good (it shares an abstract form with the Argument from Illusion); but in any case it could hardly be any comfort to a moral realist to learn that, e.g., everyone in the world had been killed except for the five people who roughly shared a moral view, so that convergence was now possible. See below in the text.

\(^\text{13}\) Cf. in this connection McGrath, “Moral Realism Without Convergence.” The paper begins with a definition of ‘Convergence’ that sounds a lot like Stevenson’s law, but the discussion that follows appears to be largely about what, as it seems to me, is the trivial question. Williams, in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, was quite clear that the prospects of convergence were not relevant to the question of ‘objectivity’ in ethics (see p. 135); the relevant question was, rather, about what sort of explanation we should find ourselves giving if convergence did, as it happen, occur (——as contrasted with the sort of explanation found in the ‘scientific’ case). Nevertheless, it may be that actual (as opposed to merely possible) convergence is important after all: perhaps the lack of basic agreement in ethics encourages philosophers to underestimate the prospects for genuine objectivity in ethics, or to presume that ethical inquiry is less ‘world-guided’ than, say, scientific inquiry.
Parallel considerations should discourage such maneuvers as defining ‘rationality’ (and then, perhaps, ‘open-mindedness’) in terms of ‘responsiveness to evidence’. For what counts as evidence for or against some moral judgment will surely be among the contested propositions of any moral view. And so if we call someone rational only if he is, in the loaded sense, ‘responsive to the evidence’, then of course it will transpire (by definition) that Stevenson’s Law is false; but then we will no longer be enquiring into our question: whether there is always a neutral method of adjudication.¹⁴

This brings us to the reason why Stevenson’s Law is so plausible. It appears that making a correct moral judgment will consist of two things: being apprised of the relevant non-moral facts; and drawing the correct moral conclusion from those facts. What the latter comes to, in effect, is knowing (explicitly or merely implicitly) the relevant supervenience relation between those facts and some moral judgment or other. The question then simply becomes whether it is possible for two people to disagree about the supervenience relations between the non-moral facts and the moral facts, without either party contradicting himself.

There are some strategies for resisting this thought, and I shall come to them below. But I think the idea is prima facie rather plausible. In the first place, we have the fact of experience,

¹⁴ I am presupposing throughout that internal contradiction and ignorance of (non-moral) fact are neutral adjudicators: anyone must accept that the discovery of either is a problem for his view. What I am here denying is that there are any other neutral adjudicators; but my argument need not collapse at the discovery of another. In terms of open-mindedness, the same point becomes this: all proposals for enriching the content of ‘open-mindedness’—say, with ‘openness to evidence’ or ‘the disposition to carefully consider alternatives’—such proposals will face a dilemma. On the one hand, they may be simply elaborations of the idea that one should be open to the possibility either a) that I am missing a relevant fact or else b) that I am guilty of some inconsistency. As elaborations of that idea, I have no quarrel with them: we ought, by all means, to be open to such possibilities. Alternatively, such proposals could be construed as inviting us to be open to the possibility of some further sort of error—to the possibility that we are wrong, where that wrongness does not correspond to a mistake of fact or consistency. Such proposals fall directly in my target area. There is no reason to think, I shall argue, that such openness is any more likely to lead us from error to truth, as from truth to error. A version of the argument just given applies equally to the suggestion that we must take into account the distorting effects of bias or self-interest in thinking through our moral beliefs. See, e.g., David Enoch’s “How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?” where this strategy is pursued at some length (pp. 25-7) in defense of moral realism. McGrath is more skeptical of this strategy qua defense of realism: see p. 62-3 of her ibid.
that many moral disagreements really do seem to have this shape. I suspect that many who have accepted the Law have done so on these grounds. We are all familiar with cases—in philosophy and outside of it—in which we find ourselves disagreeing with someone over a moral issue, and yet can find no irrationality (in our thin sense) in our interlocutor (or ourselves); and suspect no ignorance of relevant fact. Of course appearances can be deceiving; but it certainly looks as though there are disagreements of this kind.\textsuperscript{15}

But Stevenson’s Law is plausible even (and especially) in the abstract. The issue is this: the only apparent constraints on the moral claims that a man might consistently make are supervenience—no moral difference without a non-moral difference—and whatever logical relations obtain between his various claims and principles; and neither of these constraints is especially demanding.\textsuperscript{16} Thus compliance with supervenience is compatible with even such (batty) views as that, while it would be morally wrong to perform some action under a full moon, it is permissible on any other day; or again that people ought to be treated differently based on the color of their skin.

The other constraint is, as I say, internal consistency. But—even putting aside the apparent possibility of two views, each internally consistent, but incompatible at every single point—consistency appears also to be a rather weak constraint. For although there are many moral claims which are trivially (e.g.) derivable from other moral claims (if “It is wrong to do such-and-such to anyone” then it follows that “It is wrong to do such-and-such to Sally”), most fundamental moral claims at least appear to be logically isolated from one another. What

\textsuperscript{15} There are nevertheless several well-known strategies for explaining away the appearances: see, e.g., Brink’s “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness,” which stresses (among other things) the role of reflective equilibrium in bringing about moral agreement; Shafer-Landau’s “Ethical Disagreement, Ethical Objectivism, and Moral Indeterminacy,” which forwards moral indeterminacies as an explanation for (apparent) disagreement; and Enoch’s “How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?” which discusses these strategies and more. I return to this topic in §7, below.

\textsuperscript{16} I discuss another constraint in §5, below.
connection is there, for instance, between the claim that it is wrong to tell a lie in order to profit oneself, and the claim that one has a special obligation to members of her own family? Or between either of these two propositions, and the claim that, if I can save either one life or five, I ought to save the five? And if these basic moral propositions really are logical ‘islands’, then commitment to one will not force on anyone commitment to any other; and hence there appear to be many, many degrees of freedom in the construction of a moral view.

Famously, of course, there have been attempts to derive all such principles from some one master principle; and then to show that this master principle is itself either self-justifying, or transparent to reason, or something of the sort. That is indeed one way of making all moral claims logically (or quasi-logically) connected, and the success of such a project would mean the effective disproof of Stevenson’s Law. I suppose it would be too hasty to declare failure for these projects; but it can be said that our doubt of Stevenson’s Law should be roughly proportional to our confidence in the success of one such project.17

4. Nevertheless, there are some strategies of resistance to the Law; I shall discuss three of them (and mention another in passing). But before setting them out, I should like to indicate what I shall mean in the following by ‘a moral view’. There are many ways that such a term could be used, and, indeed, it is from the outset systematically ambiguous between (as we could put it) “a view about right and wrong conduct” and “a good view about right and wrong conduct.” No doubt there are many terrible views about right and wrong, real and merely imaginable; but we cannot rule out such views as ‘moral views’—i.e., views about morality—simply by the fact that

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17 And there would be some forms of success that would not actually disprove Stevenson’s Law after all: unless the master principle really were derivable ‘from reason alone’, it could be that the triumph of some particular moral theory reflected, not the impossibility of deep disagreement, but contingent convergence on a particular moral system. On Kantianism, see the following section.
they are (in our other sense) immoral views. We can rule out, for the purposes of this discussion, views according to which nothing is right or wrong. But this still leaves innumerable other views, and our question will be, in effect, whether there is always a position-neutral method for adjudicating between any two such views (or the various elements within them). And what is a ‘moral view’, in this wide sense? Let us say that a moral view consists of the set of beliefs of some individual (real or imagined) that are, each of them, characterizable as supervenience relations (or ‘bridge-laws’, if you like) between a set of non-moral facts and some moral judgment or other. Thus we have a series of judgments about right and wrong which are systematically connected to (non-moral) grounds, or reasons: “If an action has such-and-such a quality, then it is wrong”; and so on.18

Now one strategy of resistance I mention just to put aside, and that is Kantianism. I suppose that if Kant is right, and he is understood as he usually is, then reason alone compels us to accept the Categorical Imperative; and the Imperative generates all the relevant moral prohibitions and duties.19 In that case, it would appear to follow straightforwardly that Stevenson’s Law is false: one party in any moral disagreement would have to be, either, ignorant of some point of fact, or else—in some sense—contradicting himself. But what sense?

It is not with the intention of highlighting an irony that I would recall here that Kant is on record as having opposed auto-eroticism—although, in the event, he spared us the formal deduction of this prohibition from the Categorical Imperative.20 I wonder if any self-styled Kantians would join their master in this verdict. In any case, and more familiarly, we have also

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18 Whether or not such a set could then be systematized and condensed is a further matter: these remarks are made with no prejudice to the debate between particularism and generalism. Again, it may be that in any plausible ethics such principles would have to be hedged with ceteris paribus clauses; I myself suspect this is so, but the point does not affect the main argument. This point does have significance, however, for one possible strategy of resistance: see §7 below.
20 Metaphysics of Morals, Ak. vi, 425.
Kant’s doctrine on lying. Very few philosophers have been willing to accept this doctrine; hence one strategy employed by Kantians has been to understand him as, again, mistaken by his own lights.\(^\text{21}\)

On the evidence of these cases, it might be thought that disagreement, of the deep and intractable kind, is indeed possible even for Kantians. After all, Kant was not relying, in making the points just mentioned, on any disputable or dubious empirical facts. Thus on the standard Kantian line, we shall have to say that one party to the dispute (let’s say it is Kant) is, in some sense, being irrational. But what sense? The thin one outlined above? The answer to this question turns on just how ‘mechanical’ the deployment of the Categorical Imperative is supposed to be; and just what sort of deduction Kant is offering of it at, e.g., the end of the first section of the *Goundwork*.

I myself find it very hard to believe that Kant was, in any straightforward sense, contradicting himself, when he claimed that one must never tell a lie—just as I find it hard to believe that the Categorical Imperative could be operated anything like mechanically, in order to generate moral prohibitions. But I leave those questions to the Kantians. For even if Kant’s teaching on this matter was that in all such disagreements one party is contradicting himself in the strict sense (or else just wrong on matters of fact)—even if, that is, we understand Kantianism as the rejection of Stevenson’s Law; even so it will transpire that the Kantian will have reason to agree with some of my conclusions—although he will find it less depressing. I postpone discussion of this point until §8, below.

If, on the other hand, the sense in which, according to Kant, one is guilty of a ‘contradiction’ (when one chooses to do something immoral) is some looser or broader sense of

\(^{21}\) This is the strategy of, e.g., Christine Korsgaard’s “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil.”
‘contradiction’; in that case, Kant is not denying Stevenson’s Law after all, at least insofar as we are considering his claim that the dictates of morality are derivable from pure practical reason.

5. Now one way intuitively to bring out the obstacles to denying Stevenson’s Law is to note that we are apparently capable of recognizing a whole host of moral views—which views are different from and indeed contradictory to our own view—as moral views—i.e., as views about morality, or ‘right and wrong’. Another way to put the point would be to note, as I did above, that it seems quite possible to imagine ourselves—as indeed we often appear to find ourselves—disagreeing with someone else over some moral question, without believing either a) that she is missing some crucial piece of non-moral information; b) that she is contradicting herself; or—what we can now add—c) that she is not so much as talking morals at all. These three conditions together are the hallmark of what I have been calling deep disagreements; where any of these conditions fail, we are faced with a merely (relatively) shallow disagreement.

   It should be emphasized immediately that there are indeed limits to the phenomenon of deep disagreement. Although the proposition has been implicitly denied by some theorists, it appears that not just any system of approval and disapproval will count as an ethical view. One important version of this point was made by Philippa Foot, in the course of an attack she was making on non-cognitivism; but the implications are more general.22 What Foot argued was that there were some actions—e.g., laying one hand over the other three times in a row—the approval of which we simply could not understand as moral approval, absent some background story. On Foot’s view, that background story would have to connect the action in question with the concepts of human harm and human welfare. The limits of what we can morally approve of are

   22 The case is made in two companion papers, “Moral Beliefs” and “Moral Arguments.”
set by conceptual ("internal") connections between the term ‘good’ (in its distinctively moral sense) and human harm and well-being. And now this point indicates in outline a strategy of resistance to Stevenson’s Law: it opens the possibility, anyway in the abstract, that some apparent moral disagreements fail to meet condition (c), above; and are therefore not deep disagreements after all. The upshot would be, not that Stevenson’s Law was false, but that its scope was restricted—severely so, if the concepts of welfare and harm can be shown to impose strong restrictions on what counts as a moral claim.

In a moment I shall be arguing that this restriction on ethical thought is not sufficient to give us a way around Stevenson’s Law; presently, I should like to register the fact that there are other possibilities (than Foot’s) for the role she assigned human harm and benefit. The general idea was really this: we cannot so much as understand someone as making ethical claims without first having some very general conception of moral thought, into which we could fit such claims—a conception which will necessarily limit the potential content of ethical claims.

The obvious alternative would be to suppose that there are certain (as we might call them) anthropological signs, on the basis of which we could determine that someone (or some group of people) was talking about morals.23 I should note immediately that, if this were true, then the point I shall be trying to make in the sequel would follow much more readily. But there are good reasons to doubt the idea. The kind of anthropological signs that suggest themselves are basic indications of approval and disapproval. (It may help here to imagine oneself among some alien tribe, and trying to decode their language.) But as soon as the suggestion is made, difficulties rush in. I suppose if the performance of some action is followed, ritually, by the beating of the actor with sticks, then we can regard that action as disapproved of by the locals.

23 A relatively sophisticated version of this strategy is set out in Simon Blackburn’s Ruling Passions (see pp. 9ff.), although his concerns there are different.
But what sort of disapproval is it? Perhaps this action is disfavored by the local chieftain. Or perhaps again the action in question is merely imprudent, and the offender’s friends are just trying to get him to get his act together. Part of Foot’s point was that there are all sorts of approval and disapproval; and strictly moral disapproval is marked off from the rest, not by degree or ritualization, but rather by the connections (real or imagined) between the behavior and (as Foot would have it) human harm and benefit.

This much of Foot’s story is, I think, highly plausible. In the present context what matters is the implications for the scope of ethical disagreement that is so much as conceivable. Not just any movement from an assessment of the non-moral facts to disapproval (or approval) will count as a moral judgment; and hence not every disagreement fitting this form will count as a moral disagreement. There are certain, definite restrictions on what counts as a moral judgment. In the terms I was using before: not every supervenience relation counts as a genuine moral principle (good or bad).

But how severe are these restrictions? I think that if we take Foot’s own proposal seriously, the answer is ‘not very severe at all’. On her view, application of the term ‘good’ is limited by the concepts of human harm and welfare; but just how limited are these latter concepts? Although Foot was at pains to deny it,24 these concepts appear to be quite elastic. Some reflections on moral history, and the various sorts of things that have been praised and condemned, suffice, I think, to make us rather skeptical about the limits of the concept of human welfare. Nor is it the case that all those who have practiced alien moralities were just mistaken about some non-moral facts. It is not plausible, e.g., that a citizen of the West who practices, in this day, the (putative) virtue of chastity, is laboring under a misapprehension about (say) the

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24 See “Moral Beliefs,” pp. 89-91.
consequences of extra-marital sexual relations. On the contrary, those who practice this way of life are apt to explain their choices in terms of ‘human harm’ which are, not so much disputed by the rest of us, as simply not used by us at all: the idea of corruption is, in this context, quite clearly the concept of a sort of human harm; and to suppose that someone is ‘corrupted’ by behaving unchastely is not, in the usual case, to hold recherché views about human biology.25

In another direction we find virtues like honor, which, in its traditional form, is not much in evidence today (anyway, in the liberal West). And yet we again have no trouble seeing a conception which places honor at the center of a good life—or, less tendentiously, which places a high premium on honor—as a basically ethical conception. However alien we may find the ethos of Bronze Age Greece, we nevertheless recognize that, for Achilles, the loss of Briseus is perceived as a kind of harm, in the distinctive sense Foot intended (whether or not we sympathize with him). Or again, it would be a misunderstanding, I think, to take (say) familial impiety, as it was regarded in a traditional culture, to be a kind of superstitious pragmatism.26

25 I have heard it objected in this context that those who practice chastity are indeed laboring under a misapprehension of empirical fact: the idea that there is a divine being who wants them not to have sex sometimes. I must say that this suggestion strikes me as extraordinarily parochial. Leaving aside actual atheistic counterexamples, and the metaphysical difficulties attaching to any divine command theory, I can only say that I have never heard a religious person defend such views exclusively on the grounds that her god so bids her.

26 Each of these cases could be disputed, I suppose. The temptation would be to assimilate each to a kind of human harm that we ourselves already do accept—so that honor, e.g., might be construed as a kind of social credit that could be used to purchase more familiar goods. I think that would be a mistake. (Interesting speculation on this score, and in particular on the idea that “conservatives” tend to have values that are more or less invisible to their “liberal” counterparts, can be found in the work of the social psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham: see their “When Morality Opposes Justice.”)

If, as I am suggesting, antecedent and independent notions of human harm and well-being are not sufficient to constrain the domain of ethics, it remains a nice question by just what marks we recognize some claim as an ethical claim—some disapproved action as an imputation of harm, in the required sense. One possibility, tacitly raised by David Brink, in the course of a different (thought importantly related) discussion (it is no coincidence that he, like Foot, is arguing against non-cognitivists), is that we operate with a general ethical “concept” (into which individual ethical “conceptions” are fitted) that is marked out by certain formal features—e.g., the necessary aspiration of ethical claims to the assent of everyone—see his “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics,” p. 172-3. As with the ‘anthropological’ criteria, the point I am trying to make would follow more straightforwardly on such a view. On Brink’s view proper, see below.
The upshot is that, although not every proposition which connects a series of non-moral facts, on the left-hand side, with (e.g.) the form of words “it’s wrong,” on the right, will count as a genuine moral judgment (“laying one hand on top of the other is wrong”); still, the possibilities for alternative moral views are legion—the possibilities, that is, for recognizably moral disagreement with someone who, nevertheless, agrees with us about the non-moral facts, and is not contradicting himself. This point is underscored, as I have said, by reflection on the various things people have actually called ‘good’ (in its peculiarly moral sense) in the course of human history. It goes without saying that, in certain times and places, some actions or practices were called ‘good’—were morally approved of—on the basis of a putative, and in fact false, connection with some other good, one which we should all agree was indeed a good—as for example certain child-rearing practices, which had, as their justification, the goal of producing happy and successful children. But then there have been other goods which have been supposed to be good in and of themselves (chastity, e.g., or, to take another case, certain Romantic conceptions of authenticity); and, however alien such views may be to us, they cannot be ruled out on ‘logical’ grounds. The notion of ‘human well-being’ is just too elastic.27

6. A second strategy of resistance might be thought to be found in another variety of ‘naturalism’—a ‘synthetic ethical naturalism’ of the kind associated with Boyd and Brink.28 This is the view that moral properties will be discovered to be synthetically identical with certain non-moral properties.

Now on first blush, and in light of the remarks in the previous section, a ‘synthetic’ naturalism might not seem to offer the best hope for defending the view that moral

27 Cf. parallel remarks in Bernard Williams’s Morality, pp. 75-81.
28 See, e.g., Boyd’s “How to Be a Moral Realist” and Brink’s Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics.
disagreements must ultimately be adjudicatable on neutral grounds: synthetic ethical naturalism after all begins with the concession that analytic naturalism is false; that Moore was right that there are no analytic entailments between any non-moral statements—or non-moral property attributions—and moral judgments (or moral ‘property ascriptions’). But the animating idea behind the program has always been that identities between moral and non-moral properties could nevertheless be uncovered, and this through a holistic confirmation process, analogous to that which takes place in the (idealized) natural sciences: just as water was discovered to be identical to H₂O, goodness will be discovered to be identical with (say) the (functional) property of being-pleasure-productive-in-human-beings. The upshot would be a further, very severe restriction on the logical space of ethical views, in addition to the two mentioned above (supervenience and internal consistency). Total success of the project would entail the adjudicability of every moral dispute, by way of something like the scientific method.

Now there are various ways that this proposal could be worked out. But the difficulty with any of them, as a solution to our problem, can be brought to light by considering the objection posed to synthetic ethical naturalism by Horgan and Timmons in their seminal critique of the naturalist program. Horgan and Timmons put their complaint in the form of a revised Open Question Argument; but the force of their point can be brought out, equally well, as the complaint that synthetic naturalism makes the resolution of ethical disputes the upshot of a kind

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29 This is how Blackburn spells out (one version of) his principle E (see again pp. 116-118 of “Moral Realism”). Blackburn in fact distinguishes this principle from Moore’s conclusion, on the grounds that Moore was arguing against, what is stronger, property identities. The qualification is irrelevant here: synthetic naturalists of the ‘Cornell Realism’ variety have tended to concede even Blackburn’s E; but see the following section.

30 The result, again, would not be the disproof of Stevenson’s Law, but the curtailment of its reach: when the project had run its course, anyone who had incorrect moral views would indeed be contradicting himself in our thin sense.

of empirical inquiry, and that this is fatal for any picture of ethics.\(^\text{32}\) To bring this out, it may be worth rehearsing a little of the history of this dispute.

The lynchpin of synthetic ethical naturalist views is some version or other of a direct reference theory. Such theories clear the way for the (synthetic) identification of properties, and in particular, or moral and non-moral properties. Now Boyd’s own favored direct reference theory was a *causal regulation* thesis, according to which some term, ‘t’, refers to some kind, K, just in case there are causal mechanisms that bring it about that, over time, what is predicated of ‘t’ will be approximately true of K. And thus just what (non-moral) property ‘good’ refers to is determined by what (non-moral) property is regulating the use of ‘good’ among competent users of the term.\(^\text{33}\)

But just how are the facts about what-is-causally-regulating-what to be discovered? The obvious answer is: some sort of empirical inquiry; but this has all sorts of problematic results. Horgan and Timmons emphasized the point that it would be possible to discover that two communities—here on Earth, and elsewhere on Twin Earth, e.g.—were simply *referring to different things* with their words ‘good’; and hence that, so far from disagreeing about ethics, were merely talking past each other. The upshot would be a kind of relativism (and of course putting the other community on another planet was merely a dramatization).

But there are more immediate problems. Why, it might be asked, should we allow our views of right and wrong to be made a slave to whatever we discover about how most people use the word ‘good’? Mightn’t most people after all be wrong? And if the Nazis had won the war,

\(^{32}\) See also in this connection Eric Gampel’s “A Defense of the Autonomy of Ethics: Why Value is Not Like Water”; Brink cites as a source for this complaint (at p. 163 of his “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics”) John G. Bennett.

\(^{33}\) Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” 195, 203-5; I have omitted some of the details of Boyd’s treatment.
and entrenched their own linguistic practices, would we then have to acquiesce in *their* use of the word ‘good’?\(^{34}\)

There is a line of response available to the synthetic naturalist, and it was sketched by Brink in his “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics.” An evaluation of the success of this response is not relevant to the present discussion, but its general outline is. Brink’s strategy, in effect, was argue that the methods used to determine just what was causally regulating\(^{35}\) our use of the word ‘good’ would simply *parallel* the ordinary methods for discovering facts about right and wrong: very roughly, we would employ the same methods that would be used to achieve a community-wide reflective equilibrium. This appears to undercut the worries canvassed in the last paragraph, that ethical inquiry would become a kind of empirical inquiry.

Perhaps some response to Horgan and Timmons along these lines would be successful. No such response, however, will help with *our* problem. The difficulty is this: either Horgan and Timmons are correct, and synthetic ethical naturalism violates the autonomy of ethics by turning ethical investigation into a species of empirical investigation; or else Brink’s response defuses this worry, but we no longer have any assurance that there really is a position-neutral method for adjudicating all ethical disputes. After all, insofar as the methods of discovering the causal regulators of our ethical terms simply mirror ordinary ethical investigation, exactly the same considerations discussed at the end of §3 (above) will apply to synthetic ethical naturalism. We may be confident that ethical properties are synthetically identical with some natural property (or properties) or other; but there will evidently be many possible moral views—real and merely imaginary—on which ethical properties are associated with quite different natural properties.

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\(^{34}\) The problems listed summarily here are sometimes classed together as consequences of violating the ‘autonomy of ethics’; see again Gampel’s paper.

\(^{35}\) In fact, Brink’s own favored direct reference theory was a modified causal regulation thesis, in which the role of the (referential) intentions of a speaker are crucial; but the details do not concern us.
The problem was, in a way, clear from the beginning. Synthetic ethical naturalism promised to circumvent disputes over the correct supervenience relations by discovering, through an independent method, what our moral terms refer to; insofar as this method is genuinely independent, we encounter the problems laid out by Horgan and Timmons; insofar as the method is not independent, we are returned to the original problem.

7. There is, as I said above, another line of resistance which I think is in one way more promising. It is, however, less generally appealing: I think it is only really available to, or anyway plausible for, a moral particularist—someone who is skeptical about the possibility of codifying ethics into general rules.36 This strategy begins by accepting Stevenson’s Law—or rather, remaining agnostic about it—but then goes on to insist that we can never actually know that we are genuinely in a ‘deep’ disagreement.

Thus, as I noted above, making the correct moral judgment evidently depends on two things: besides knowing the correct supervenience relations—or anyway, being disposed to judge in accordance with them; this will matter—one must also be in possession of all the relevant non-moral facts. Of course, the latter is just stipulated by Stevenson’s Law. But are we ever really sure that both parties are in possession of all the relevant non-moral facts?

The idea that it would be possible to be sure of such a thing is encouraged, I think, by a picture of the non-moral facts on which they are, in effect, countable. But of course there are really an infinite number of ‘non-moral facts’ about any action, or situation, or whatever—just as there are an infinite number of properties of any object. All but a vanishingly small number of these will, of course, be morally irrelevant, in any given situation. But if we suppose, with the

36 This is far from a precise definition of ‘particularism’, which indeed comes in many varieties. But the subtleties are irrelevant here, and the crude definition is enough.
particularist, that any non-moral fact could be, in the right situation, morally relevant; then we might go on to suppose that, when two parties are in disagreement with each other, it is always the case that one party is just missing something; and that being apprised of this fact, he will see the error of his ways.\textsuperscript{37}

There are, I think, some situations where this perspective seems to be supported. But as a general story about moral disagreement, I am myself very skeptical of it, for reasons that will be familiar from discussions of moral disagreement in the literature. The fact is, when we want to explain the persistence of deep moral disagreement—whether across cultures or within one—we are irresistibly drawn to etiological explanations: “we were raised differently.” And this sort of explanation is not (in general) meant to indicate that some people are given more non-moral facts during their upbringing (though no doubt this is true, and may really explain some cases of moral disagreement). No, this explanation is a way of saying that different people are reared to ‘believe in’ different supervenience relations between the non-moral facts and the moral ones—different ‘bridge-laws’.\textsuperscript{38}

Of course, the fact that we are liable to turn to an explanation of this kind in the face of (apparently) intractable moral disagreement is no proof that it is after all the correct explanation. But the alternative explanation—that one party to the dispute knows more non-moral facts than the other, though she cannot evidently articulate them—is a bit hard to swallow. Its plausibility turns on the status of a ‘tracking’ principle of the following sort: If I believe that either my interlocutor’s moral view or my own rests on a mistake about an empirical matter of fact, I must

\textsuperscript{37} For this to work as an explanation of moral disagreement, we should have to suppose that knowledge of the moral supervenience relations is merely implicit—a disposition to judge in accordance with those relations. Otherwise, each party could simply rattle off the relevant bridge laws; and the critical non-moral fact which, we are supposing, one side was missing, could be discovered by a straightforward process of elimination.

\textsuperscript{38} A similar note is struck by David Enoch in his “How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?”; see p. 24.
be able to say what that fact is—anyway I must be able to point, even if only roughly, to what sort of empirical investigation would settle the dispute.

That seems to me a pretty compelling principle. And although there really are situations in which we think “Perhaps she knows something I don’t,” still, reflection on such situations discourages the thought that most ethical disagreements with the appearance of depth fall into this type: generally, when we have such a thought, we have some independent grounds for supposing that she knows something we don’t (independent of the fact that we are disagreeing); and generally, our suspicion is vindicated, sooner or later. Neither of these things is true, in general, of moral disputes of the (apparently) intractable kind.

In any case, the merits of taking the position outlined here are distinctly limited. For even if we suppose that all of our actual moral disagreements could really be resolved by weeding out non-moral ignorance, it would remain true that there are possible moral views which differ from (say) ours, the disputes over which cannot be so adjudicated—unless of course we, in addition, plump for something like the Kantian line rehearsed above. This is, of course, just another way of saying that this strategy actually begins by conceding Stevenson’s Law. And while it would certainly be, in one sense, encouraging to believe that agreement in morals can, as a matter of fact, be secured simply by adducing more and more non-moral facts, in another sense it is hardly encouraging at all: it could be, for all that has been supposed, that we are all so hopelessly corrupted, that the view on which everyone would converge, given time and patience, would be a travesty of the correct moral view. And—to anticipate—this would hardly be any inducement to open-mindedness.

8. So suppose Stevenson’s Law really is correct; perhaps the reader has even shared the intuition in the first place. It follows that there will not always be a neutral method for adjudicating
between any two views. More: if such ‘deep’ disagreements are indeed always possible; if the logical constraints on a moral view are, as I argued above, fairly weak; it then appears we have no good *prima facie* reason, during a moral disagreement, for supposing that our interlocutor (or we ourselves) are either contradicting ourselves or mistaken in some relevant matter of non-moral fact. If we also accept the ‘tracking’ principle from the previous section, and some data from ordinary life—the appearance of deep disagreement—it further follows that we can recognize ourselves to be involved in genuinely deep disagreements, and indeed often do.

Before considering just what is implied by all this, it is worth pausing, for a moment, to look at what is *not* implied. Thus we are not *obviously* forced by Stevenson’s Law alone, e.g., to accept either anti-realism or any kind of skepticism about morals. For while it would be *possible* to suppose straightaway that there must be ‘no fact of the matter’ about the relevant controverted questions; or indeed to fall back on a kind of skepticism; still, absent some principle which declares that there is ‘no truth without proof’; or one which explains why we must always be able to convince just anyone else, on her terms, of some proposition \( p \) in order to be credited with knowing that \( p \); absent such principles, the fact that there is no position-neutral method of adjudicating between two disputing parties does not obviously show either that the disputed claim is not ‘bivalent’, nor even that neither party can be said to ‘know’ the truth.

—Not obviously, as I say. The question is still disputed, and many have felt that anyway *something* is jeopardized by Stevenson’s Law. (Indeed, I myself am arguing that.) For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall assume that neither skepticism nor anti-realism is implied by Stevenson’s Law. I shall assume, in fact, that there is indeed some set of ‘bridge laws’ which together constitute the Correct Moral View.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{39}\) The question of what lessons we should draw from disagreements of various kinds (actual or potential) has been the subject of some recent debate, under the title of the ‘epistemology of disagreement’. The present topic, however,
Neither is it implied that changing one’s mind in moral matters is not possible, once all the facts are in and the contradictions weeded out. For even in the absence of such levers, there remains the possibility of what might properly be called ‘conversion’: being moved, suddenly or gradually, consciously or otherwise, to see an alternative bridge-law as correct, and one’s former position as simply wrong. My point in the foregoing could also be put by saying that, for any moral view one begins with, there will be some other imaginable moral view, from the former of which to the latter (and vice versa), there will be no ‘route’—no neutral method of adjudication: only conversion.

Far from being some recherché occurrence, the phenomenon of conversion is, I think, quite familiar to us. It goes without saying that a conversion need not take the form of a heavenly vision; on the contrary, there are known methods of conversion, and they usually involve telling certain kinds of stories, eliciting the sympathy of the potential convert, or getting him to see something from someone else’s point of view.

Now nothing I have said so far rules out the possibility, at least in principle, that, by the patient accumulation of empirical facts, and the removal of contradictions from one’s own view, it might be possible to reach unanimity—say, within the liberal West—on moral matters; nothing indeed rules out the possibility that there is a route from the current consensus (insofar as there is one) to the Correct Moral View. On the other hand, given Stevenson’s Law, nothing rules out

does not fall under the ambit of the theories discussed there, focusing as that literature does on disagreement between epistemic peers. The kinds of cases we are interested in here—cases, real or imagined, in which we are in conflict with someone who agrees with us on the non-moral facts, and yet disagrees about what moral judgment follows from them—these are not cases of disagreement between peers in the relevant sense: our (imaginary) interlocutor is disbarred from that title on the grounds that her “weighting policy” for the evidence (here, perhaps, an unfortunate expression) is, ex hypothesi, quite wrong. (See, e.g., Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” p. 494.) The situation is then something like that obtaining between the inductivist and a counter-inductivist: neither side can produce a non-question-begging argument against the other. Many theorists have contended that it is not necessary to produce a non-question-begging vindication of one’s own weighting policy in order to suppose that one’s own policy is correct, and his opponent’s wrong—the alternative would be an intolerable skepticism, and not just in ethics. See, e.g., Christenson’s “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” p. 191, fn. 7.
the possibility that we shall thus converge on a very bad moral view—one from which the Correct Moral View is only accessible by conversion.40

So: should we be open-minded? Certainly, we should be open to the possibility that we are wrong about the empirical facts, or that our views are internally inconsistent. But that is not the sort of open-mindedness I have in mind; no one, I think, would dispute the idea that we should be open to new empirical facts, or to the discovery of hidden contradictions.41 What I am interested in is open-mindedness to moral views which can only be reached by conversion.

What is this kind of open-mindedness? When we dispense with contradictions and non-moral error, what kind of openness to being wrong remains? I think it is entirely familiar—indeed, it is usually praised as a virtue. It is in the first place a kind of practical disposition: the disposition to listen to one’s opponent, to ‘hear her out’ and engage with her. But it is also a kind of psychological or attitudinal disposition: a kind of receptiveness, or openness to being moved; a willingness to see things from an alien point of view, or ‘try on’ certain attitudes and feelings.

I have just noted that it may be that the only route from our own view to the correct one is by way of conversion. Indeed there seems no reason to deny that this often happens. I suppose it is an historical question, just what made (say) 19th Century Americans decide that chattel slavery was immoral (when they did). But if what I have said in the foregoing is sound (and we take it as axiomatic that slave-holding is indeed an affront to morality) then we cannot rule out that what actually took place, anyway for some individual or other, was sheer conversion: he moved from one moral view to another, without having discovered any internal contradictions,

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40 There are implications here for the method of ‘reflective equilibrium’.
41 Almost no one. I think this intuition could probably be elicited too. I have no interest in defending it, so I put it aside.
nor any false empirical beliefs. (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not, I think, a work of moral theory.) More to the point, we cannot rule out the possibility that the *only* route, for him, from his monstrous view to the correct one was conversion.42

Reflecting on such a case, one might be inclined to suppose that open-mindedness is after all a virtue, not in spite of but precisely in light of Stevenson’s Law. But of course that would be a mistake since, by parity of reasoning, nothing rules it out that one might be converted to a wrong or even monstrous view—worse, to a view from which one could not get back to the correct view by amassing facts or discovering contradictions. As far as the phenomenon of conversion goes,43 it is quite possible that the abolitionists might have been converted by the slave-holders. Indeed, it is possible that such a conversion might yet take place.44 And that raises grave questions, I think, about the virtue of open-mindedness.

What Stevenson’s Law tells us is that there are at least some moral views which are different from our own, and which we cannot reach by any means but conversion—and from which we cannot *return* but by re-conversion: such views will be internally coherent and impervious to the (non-moral) facts. Should we be open to exponents of such views? Should we listen patiently to their persuasive stories, or allow them to prey upon our various sympathies? (For it is by no means true that sympathy has only ever led men from darkness into light.)

Perhaps a defender of open-mindedness will insist that she never had in mind imaginatively inhabiting the moral psychology of a slave-holder—‘trying on’ pro-slavery views

42 It may be worth saying in passing that the phenomenology of conversion is significantly complicated in practice by the fact that, very often, having been converted, one will now indeed see one’s former views as contradictory; nevertheless the ‘contradiction’ will not have been visible from the original position. Thus although it now seems obvious that race slavery was always incompatible with the principles set out in (e.g.) the Declaration, that did *not* seem so to all slaveholders. The ‘contradiction’ in question could not have been discovered by logic alone.

43 I mean: the following is not *historically* plausible.

44 However Whiggish our stories about moral development, it surely cannot be presupposed that moral progress is *inevitable.*
and seeing how they feel, as it were. But it is far from clear how we might mark out the area
where it is appropriate to be open-minded independently of the substance of our own moral
convictions. Should the man who is deeply morally opposed to illicit drug use ‘try on’ the
attitudes (and habits?) of his opponents? Should he be open-minded about that? Or, to take an
element from another direction, should someone who regards homosexual behavior as morally
anathema be open-minded to the alternative view? Should we be open to hers? There is no
guarantee that such a person occupies a position that is covertly self-contradictory, or
undermined by the empirical facts. And yet her convictions on this score may be as sincere and
heartfelt as our own opposition to slavery.

It should be noted here that a man who is closed-minded is indeed more likely to persist
in error than one who is open-minded: if we now occupy a position from which the correct
moral view is accessible only by conversion, then by closing our ears to the advocates of that
view, we guarantee that we shall remain in moral ignorance forever. But someone who is
closed-minded is also more liable to persist in adherence to the correct view—more liable to
resist the meretricious charms of a morally mistaken view. Moreover, he is not any more likely
to be wrong than an open-minded person (—supposing it makes sense to speak of ‘likelihood’
here). And that is, I think, the surprising thing. It is quite plausible, in many domains of life,
that being open-minded will lead, if not inevitably, then anyway more likely than not, from
confusion and error and towards the truth. But nothing like that seems true of morality.

Thus I may be deeply attached (for whatever reason) to the idea that the way back to the
hotel runs down this street and not that one. But unless I am willing to just refuse to face facts, I
shall have to accept that my belief might just be proven wrong: I shall either reach the hotel, or
walk straight out of the city, as the case may be. And then on the other hand, if I am open to the
opposing view, and it is wrong, I shall soon learn it. Whereas in ethical cases, it appears, my
own view—right or wrong—may well be impervious to the facts; that the view of my friend,
with whom I differ, is also so impervious, will offer no incentive for openness to his view—quite
the contrary, since I shall regard that view as somewhere between mistaken and monstrous, I
have a positive incentive to be closed-minded towards it—especially since, unlike beliefs about
hotel-locations, it is not itself susceptible of disproof. What Stevenson’s Law shows is that
ethical investigation is not, apparently, self-correcting, as navigational investigation is. And it
would require only a mild-risk aversion to make one believe that the safest course was indeed
closed-mindedness.

But even for those who are not risk-averse, there will be an incentive to closed-
mindedness. Although it could not be said that a moral view ‘certifies itself’, in any demanding
sense, still each person’s view does in one sense ‘vote for itself’: however much humility I have,
I also have convictions about what is right and what is wrong; and knowing, as I shall, that
conversion means approving of things which I now regard as anathema, I have a special moral
incentive to remain closed-minded—I cannot help but see such conversion as corruption. Of
course I also know that, once converted, I shall see my present view as mistaken; but that is
hardly any consolation.

The last points notwithstanding, there is a sense of ‘ought’ on which it would after all be
correct to say that one “ought to be open-minded” in moral matters—the ‘god’s-eye view’ sense
of ‘ought’. To say this would be, in effect, to treat ‘open-mindedness’ as a second-order virtue
term, in the sense described above: the correct application of it would be made to turn on the
application of antecedent moral concepts. Treated in this way, a man would be praised for being
open-minded just when he practiced the relevant attitudinal disposition (described above) when
confronted with good or correct moral views; and that same disposition, in the face of bad or incorrect views, would be no virtue at all and in fact not even ‘open-mindedness’ properly understood. Whether it would prove useful to speak this way, I cannot say. But in any case we could not say the same thing—that one ought to be open-minded—if the ‘ought’ is construed on the advice model. For of course it would be no advice at all to tell someone that he ought to be open to conversion when faced with a good moral view, which (ex hypothesi) he doesn’t now believe, but not to a bad one (which he doesn’t now believe).45

The point I am trying to make could also be put by noting that there are some people—and some cultures: ours, I think it could be said—that are more open than others to hearing out the other side; to listening to the opposition’s exhortations and to the (supposed) advantages of an entirely different way of life. And if we suppose that such open-mindedness does, as a matter of brute fact, tend to encourage conversion, then it will have to be asked what reason we have to think this open-mindedness is any more likely to lead to enlightenment than to corruption. And if the answer really is ‘none’, then we should also ask: What’s so great about being open-minded?

Such talk may encourage us to reevaluate the strict Kantian line I put aside above. But interestingly, even if we opt for that line, and reject Stevenson’s Law altogether, we need not entirely reject the conclusions just rehearsed. The Kantian will be more sanguine—perhaps—that convergence on moral matters can be reached—indeed, convergence on the Correct Moral View.46 But to accept this is not to deny that conversion is a genuine phenomenon; that people are sometimes moved from one moral position to another by factors other than the discovery of a

45 The equivalent, in the epistemology of disagreement literature, of this way of treating open-mindedness—as a ‘second-order virtue’—is the so-called ‘right reasons view’.

46 I say “perhaps” because one can of course be a Kantian and also take a dim view of human nature, and in particular of the extent to which people will ever let their moral views be influenced by reason alone.
hidden contradiction, or the revelation of a critical non-moral fact—that, indeed, one might be thus moved from a sound view to a very bad one. Of course the Kantian will be less unnerved by the situation than those who accept Stevenson’s Law; she will urge us to examine the reasoning behind each of two opposed moral positions, I suppose, and discover which of them in fact squares with the Categorical Imperative. Supposing people are decent enough that this can be done, convergence on moral views will eventually happen; we are never in danger of being stranded on a moral island, and wondering just why we should set sail for another one. There is always a route back. Those of us who accept the Law will be left without even that comfort.

One, somewhat inadequate way to put the point I have been making is to say that the rejection of Kantianism is at the same time the acceptance that, even for a full-blooded moral realist, our moral beliefs deserve the title of ‘commitments’. Like commitments of other kinds, our fundamental moral beliefs are, in the first place, something in which we are heavily invested; and in the second, they are views which we do not think we can necessarily vindicate to others, nor ones which we can regard others as irrational (in our thin sense) for denying. Unlike commitments of other sorts (my commitment to the Buffalo Bills, say), we also believe our moral commitments to be true. But the question remains, for these commitments as for any other, why we should let ourselves be seduced into abandoning our own commitments for someone else’s. If the only route to the opposed view is through conversion, then just what could entice us to be open-minded, in the sense lately described, towards that view? To say this is not, without a good deal of further argument, to deny that ethical claims are bivalent, or to say that we need an error theory for ethics. But it is to say that some of the worries sometimes
expressed, about the potential for moral conservativeness in any non-cognitivist system, will carry over to cognitivist ones as well.\textsuperscript{47} \textsuperscript{48}

9. I mentioned at the outset that a defense of open-mindedness might be mounted on another foundation: open-mindedness as a kind of civic virtue. The idea here is that it’s just more polite to be open-minded; that listening to the other side increases civility and comity. It seems to me that this is true. But the civic-virtue version is a little harder to recommend, I think, once we have conceded that open-mindedness proper is \textit{not} such a great thing. For in that case what is being recommended is, in effect, a kind of public play-acting or shamming; we ought, it will have to be said, to \textit{pretend} to be open to having our minds changed about our moral convictions, while all the time steeling ourselves against the influence of our interlocutor’s words. Is that a

\textsuperscript{47} The notion that a committed noncognitivist might lack any “intellectual reason .... to take time to listen” to her opponents is mooted by Francis Snare in \textit{Morals, Motivation, and Convention} at p. 243; he attributes the point to Lloyd Humberstone. Nicholas Sturgeon questions, in “What Difference Does It Make Whether Moral Realism Is True?” (especially pp. 127-134) whether a noncognitivist can so much as operate a notion of moral fallibility—a point which would have similar consequences. Bernard Williams contemplates something similar, though without a decisive conclusion, in \textit{Morality} at pp. 34-6 (and later, glancingly, at p. 86), under the heading of the ‘mid-air position’. (Williams’s official topic there is what he calls ‘subjectivism’, but it is clear that a good deal of what he is discussing is in fact a form of noncognitivism.)

\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps it will be felt nevertheless that the air of noncognitivism hangs over the remarks in the last paragraph. Another example might dispel that air. Thus I have so far been urging that Stevenson’s Law is local to ethics. But I think I can imagine one sort of empirical case in which something analogous might happen. Thus it is perhaps conceivable that there might be two grand Theories of Everything, that proposed and indeed managed to explain and (so far as this it was possible) predict all the phenomena of physics; but, further, that these two theories were incompatible with each other and, what is worse, that neither could be vindicated over the other, even on such quasi-aesthetic grounds as relative parsimony. (Perhaps one theory economizes on fundamental particles and the other on fundamental forces.) If we are committed realists about the realm of physics then I suppose we shall have to say that only one of the theories can be correct, while the other merely mimics the real one in terms of predictive success and explanatory power. And yet for all that, we are, I am imagining, powerless to prove that our theory (say) is correct and our rivals’ false—“Only God knows,” we might say. Here we evidently find ourselves in a situation much like the one I have tried to make plausible in ethics—but with this difference: no one would care. What the two Theories of Everything have in common with our Stevenson standoffs is that there is no neutral method of adjudication—no independent method of assessment which could vindicate one side over the other. But, although it would be possible to believe (as it were, in one’s heart of hearts) that one’s own Theory was correct, it would nevertheless be a matter of complete indifference: \textit{ex hypothesi}, nothing would hang on accepting one theory over the other. Whereas in ethics we have no such luxury: it is emphatically not a matter of indifference whether other people behave in a way we deem immoral. To deny this would be, not to cleave to cognitivism, but to reject a central platitude about ethical life.
virtue? It is certainly something that we should sometimes do, I think. But is it a good general attitude to take? Ought we really to behave in this way with our friends and acquaintances, with whom we have (relevantly ‘deep’) ethical disagreements?

It would be childish, I suppose, to maintain that pretense is not a necessary, if ugly, part of ordinary life. But the kind of pretense involved here seems deeper and rather uglier: one would have to say that we ought to pretend, while (say) a friend rehearses for us his deepest moral convictions, to be willing to change our minds, while in fact doing our best to insulate ourselves against the effect of his words.⁴⁹

—Supposing, that is, that we have elected to be (in the primary sense of the term) closed-minded. For all that I have said, it might still be felt that there are some advantages to being open-minded—especially if one is more risk-prone than risk–averse; or if one is not particularly attached to his own moral views. After all, my own view might be wrong; perhaps I can only reach the correct view by being open-minded. The point has only been this: given the fact that I now believe my view on some moral matter is correct; that someone is trying to persuade me to a contrary view (which, naturally, I regard as incorrect); that there is no route to her view but by conversion, nor indeed any route back; and that, having been persuaded, I shall regard my former view as incorrect and my new view as right; but that there is (to repeat) no neutral method of adjudication between the views; given these things, what really recommends open-mindedness over closed-mindedness? If it makes sense to speak of ‘likelihood’ at all here then, as I have said, it appears that, by being closed-minded, I am only as ‘likely’ to persist in error as I am to be resisting corruption. And that is my complaint.

⁴⁹ It might be thought that we could take the sting out of the last remark by asking, e.g., why we would be friends with a defender of slavery in the first place. But that is not the only sort of case; he need not be the kind of person we would naturally regard as a moral monster; he could be defending, e.g., some out-of-fashion virtue like chastity or familial piety.
Bibliography


