

1 Debunking arguments in  
2 normative ethics: a defense  
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7 ABSTRACT: This paper explains why debunking arguments in normative  
8 ethics can be compelling. The key challenge is to distinguish those argu-  
9 ments from the sorts of global debunking arguments that philosophers like  
10 Sharon Street defend. I show how a new metaethical framework solves this  
11 challenge. On the framework, there are Easy Contexts where moral knowl-  
12 edge and evidence is easy to acquire, and also Hard Contexts where moral  
13 knowledge and evidence is hard to acquire. Global debunking arguments  
14 are not compelling in the Easy Contexts, but local debunking arguments  
15 still are.

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18 Some moral intuitions seem like evidence against standard consequen-  
19 tialist theories. For example, we tend to have the intuition that it's wrong  
20 for a doctor to kill a patient even if killing him would save five. It's hard  
21 for standard consequentialists to explain this intuition. Some consequen-  
22 tialists revise their theory in response. But others attack the intuitions  
23 themselves, arguing that those intuitions are not reliable sources of evi-  
24 dence; Peter Singer (2005) is a prominent example. I'll say that such  
25 attempts are attempts to *debunk* the intuitions.

26 Consequentialist debunkers do not want to debunk *all* our moral intu-  
27 tions. They rely on other moral intuitions to support their consequen-  
28 tialist view. Such consequentialists must distinguish the intuitions that they  
29 *do* want to debunk from the intuitions that they do *not* want to debunk.  
30 Their ambitions are thus very different from the ambitions of someone like  
31 Sharon Street (2006, 2008a, 2008b). She tries to (conditionally) debunk *all*  
32 our moral intuitions (conditional on moral realism being true); she argues  
33 that none of those intuitions would be knowledge. But it's surprisingly  
34 hard to develop debunking arguments that only apply to some of our moral  
35 intuitions. Consequentialist debunkers may succeed only by undermining  
36 any evidence for their own view.

37 This challenge seems to be a distinctive challenge for consequentialist  
38 debunkers. But I think that related challenges arise for us all. I think  
39 that we *all* should acknowledge that some debunking arguments are com-  
40 pelling. For example, we should all acknowledge the force of debunking  
41 arguments that undercut an intuition by showing that it's entirely due to  
42 our socio-economic position. §1 suggests that these debunking arguments  
43 raise the same sorts of questions that consequentialist debunking does. It  
44 describes a representative range of debunking arguments, noting examples  
45 from Marxian, feminist, and critical race work.

46 This paper is addressed to those who worry that these sorts of debunk-  
47 ing arguments are an unprincipled muddle. I'll offer an interpretation of  
48 these debunking arguments that is both highly principled and non-muddled.  
49 The interpretation will rely on a very substantive philosophical picture that  
50 you may reject. But my goal here is just to describe a picture where de-  
51 bunkers in normative ethics could regard their arguments as satisfying by  
52 their own lights; I don't think that extant debunkers have cleared even this  
53 low bar.

## 54 **1 Debunking arguments: an argumentative survey**

55 I begin with three initial examples of debunking arguments, and use them  
56 to introduce the problems I want to address.

### 57 **1.1 Intuitive examples**

58 Consider a slaveowner in the American antebellum South who has an imme-  
59 diate intuition that slavery is morally permissible. He finds this intuition  
60 just as compelling as his intuition that promise-keeping is often morally  
61 required. It is appropriate to *debunk* his intuition by arguing that it is  
62 due to his socio-economic position. The institution of slavery benefits him  
63 enormously, and those benefits explain his intuition; he shouldn't use that  
64 intuition as an independent source of evidence.

65 Next consider John Finnis, who insists that there is a basic practical  
66 good of "the sexual association of a man and a woman which, though it es-  
67 sentially involves both friendship between the partners and the procreation  
68 and education of children by them, seems to have a point and shared ben-  
69 efit that is not reducible either to friendship or to life-in-its-transmission"  
70 (Finnis 2013, 244). He claims to have an immediate intuition that this  
71 sexual association is a basic good. And he appeals to this intuition in ar-  
72 guing that same-sex relationships always involve a kind of immorality that  
73 opposite-sex relationships needn't.

74 Finnis' intuition also seems apt for debunking. Here is a toy example.  
75 Finnis' intuition is a philosophically sophisticated articulation of a belief-  
76 forming mechanism that militates against same-sex relationships. Suppose  
77 that that belief-forming mechanism is widespread in one community, *Com-*  
78 *munity A*, and altogether absent in *Community B*. If someone believes that  
79 same-sex sex is immoral, they'll likely try to conform their sexual activity  
80 to their moral beliefs – especially if their moral beliefs are widely shared.  
81 Community A is thus likely to contain more heterosexual coupling, and  
82 gain a slight reproductive advantage over Community B. But that slight  
83 reproductive advantage creates selective pressure in favor of Community A,  
84 explaining why their belief-forming mechanism would become widespread.  
85 This toy example could be developed into a full debunking explanation of  
86 Finnis' intuition; others are available too (Prinz 2009, 233ff).

87 Next consider my intuition that it's wrong for a surgeon to kill one to  
88 save five. Peter Singer draws on work by Joshua Greene to debunk this  
89 intuition. He suggests that we've evolved a strong aversion to immediately

90 inflicted violence, which is triggered when we imagine killing the one. He  
91 contrasts that immediate aversion with our judgments about more indus-  
92 trial killings, of the sort the trolley problem illustrates. He then complains:  
93 “what is the moral salience of the fact that I have killed someone in a way  
94 that was possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became  
95 possible only two hundred years ago? I would answer: none” (Singer 2005,  
96 348). He concludes that we shouldn’t rely on this intuition as evidence.

97 Debunking arguments are also important in confronting hierarchies in  
98 race, gender, socio-economic class, and disability. Those hierarchies gener-  
99 ate self-perpetuating beliefs – that the subordinated groups deserve their  
100 place in the hierarchy. Debunking explanations are thus important for criti-  
101 cal race (e.g., Crenshaw (2011)), feminist (e.g., Haslanger (2012)), Marxian  
102 (e.g., Wood (1972)), and disability rights (e.g., Barnes (2014)) work.

103 Some debunking arguments are facially more plausible than others. I  
104 expect that you’ll find the debunking argument about slavery most plausi-  
105 ble, and the debunking argument about consequentialism the least plausi-  
106 ble, with the others in the middle.

107 SAMPLE DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS:

- 108 • *Emancipatory* debunking of the slave-owner
- 109 • *Liberal* debunking of Finnis
- 110 • *Critical race/ feminist/ Marxian/ disability rights* de-  
111 • *bugking* of traditional hierarchies
- 112 • *Consequentialist* debunking of the doing/ allowing dis-  
113 • *tinction*

114 I’ll call these arguments *local* debunking arguments, since they only target  
115 some but not all moral intuitions. If you accept emancipatory debunking  
116 but reject consequentialist debunking, you owe us an explanation of the  
117 difference between them. In providing that explanation, you will be implic-  
118 itly appealing to a philosophical interpretation of debunking arguments –  
119 an account of their structure and why they are compelling.<sup>1</sup>

120 I’ve simplified by describing debunking arguments as targeted at par-  
121 ticular individuals, as debunking Finnis or the slave-owner. The full de-  
122 scription is that the arguments are invitations to engage in a kind of first-  
123 personal reasoning. They’re invitations to explore whether the etiology of  
124 an intuition is compatible with treating it as a source of evidence. And  
125 they present the invitation as rationally required – as what an epistemi-  
126 cally responsible person would do. That’s what distinguishes them from  
127 the *ad hominem* reasoning that we teach our students to avoid.

128 Consequentialist debunkers need an interpretation of debunking argu-  
129 ments that explains why they’re compelling when they’re compelling. But I

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<sup>1</sup>There are also debunking arguments of normative intuitions that aren’t moral intuitions as well. But this paper focuses just on the moral case; my strategy is to make progress on the most general question by focusing on the moral question that has occasioned the most interest.

130 think we all need some such interpretation, since we feel the pull of some of  
131 these arguments. The interpretation would explain whether emancipatory  
132 debunking of the slave-owner is as compelling as consequentialist debunk-  
133 ing, and if not, capture the exact difference.

## 134 1.2 Candidate philosophical interpretations

135 This section describes the two interpretations of debunking arguments that  
136 have been explicitly discussed. It will also review the reasons why they're  
137 unsatisfying.

138 The first interpretation relies crucially on *morally loaded* claims. Con-  
139 sider the emancipatory argument against slavery. This argument might  
140 implicitly rely on substantive moral claims.

141 MORAL DISTORTION<sub>Socio-Economic</sub>: Your own interests aren't  
142 more important morally than the interests of others; influ-  
143 ences on your belief that arise from benefits to you (like socio-  
144 economic position) are distorting influences and should be dis-  
145 regarded.

146 Compare an evil demon that attempts to distort your beliefs about some  
147 domain – what you remember from three days ago, say. It would be a  
148 mistake to rely on beliefs in that domain as independent evidence. Given  
149 MORAL DISTORTION, socio-economic position has the same effect as an evil  
150 demon would, and it would be a mistake to rely on the tainted beliefs.

151 Morally loaded interpretations elegantly explain why debunking argu-  
152 ments could be compelling. Unfortunately, though, they make some candi-  
153 date debunking arguments question-begging. Consider the morally loaded  
154 claim needed for debunking Finnis.

155 MORAL DISTORTION<sub>Reproduction</sub>: There isn't anything morally  
156 different about relationships with the capacity for reproduction  
157 from those without; influences on your belief that arise from  
158 reproductive pressures are distorting influences and should be  
159 disregarded.

160 Finnis himself is not going to accept this claim. He insists that the capacity  
161 for reproduction does make a moral difference; he'll insist that MORAL  
162 DISTORTION<sub>Reproduction</sub> is question-begging.

163 As noted, debunking arguments present a certain kind of first-personal  
164 reasoning as rationally required. And it's hard to see how Finnis would be  
165 rationally required to accept this morally loaded argument. If you don't  
166 agree, consider a deontologist confronted with a morally loaded consequen-  
167 tialist debunking argument.

168 MORAL DISTORTION<sub>Doing/Allowing</sub>: There isn't anything morally  
169 different about doing rather than allowing, so influences on  
170 your belief that arise from pressures in favor of distinguishing  
171 the two are distorting influences and should be disregarded.

172 It's hard see how this morally loaded claim could get a grip on a committed  
173 deontologist, and it's hard to see why it should.

174 Now someone might find *independent* arguments for these claims – for  
175 MORAL DISTORTION<sub>Reproduction</sub> and MORAL DISTORTION<sub>Doing/Allowing</sub>.  
176 Then we'd have reason to accept the conclusion of the debunking argu-  
177 ments. But in that case, the debunking argument does no real work. Selim  
178 Berker makes this point forcefully: “the basic problem is that once we rest  
179 our normative weight on an evaluation of the moral salience of the factors to  
180 which our deontological and consequentialist judgments are responding, we  
181 end up factoring out (no pun intended) any contribution that the psycho-  
182 logical processes underlying those judgments might make to our evaluation  
183 of the judgments in question” (Berker 2009, 326).

184 More generally, morally loaded debunking is especially inapt for one  
185 role that debunking arguments might play: it won't help dislodge intuitions  
186 that reflect traditional hierarchies. Patriarchal power structures don't just  
187 reinforce beliefs about women's subordinate role; they also reinforce beliefs  
188 about those power structures being a reliable guide to normative reality;  
189 that is, they produce beliefs inconsistent with the morally loaded claims  
190 necessary for debunking arguments. If feminist debunking arguments are  
191 compelling only for those who already reject the upshots of sexist power  
192 structures, they don't play much of a critical role.

193 So if the only defensible kind of debunking arguments are morally  
194 loaded, local debunking is fairly uninteresting. It's worth looking for other  
195 interpretations of debunking arguments. You may end up thinking that the  
196 morally loaded interpretations are the only interpretations that are viable.  
197 In that case, debunking arguments would be drained of much, perhaps all,  
198 of their distinctive force.

199 There is a second family of interpretations of local debunking, where  
200 local debunking does without substantive moral claims. I'll say that these  
201 interpretations are *morally unloaded*. The danger for morally unloaded  
202 interpretations is that they're only plausible if they also rationalize *global*  
203 debunking arguments of the sort that Sharon Street (2006) has defended.  
204 Those sorts of global debunking arguments purport to show that none of  
205 our moral beliefs amount to knowledge, at least on a realist construal of  
206 those beliefs.

207 Local debunking arguments would be self-defeating if they also rational-  
208 ize global debunking arguments. Local debunkers want to defend *positive*  
209 moral views – an emancipatory view of slavery, or a liberal view of sex,  
210 or ... In contrast, global debunking show that *none* of our positive moral  
211 views are justified.

212 Consider the morally unloaded interpretation of the argument in Singer  
213 (2005), against the intuition that there's a morally significant difference  
214 between doing and allowing. Singer argues that this intuition is due to  
215 evolutionary influences on our past beliefs, and that we shouldn't rely on  
216 the intuition when we recognize its etiology. As a comparison, suppose  
217 that we found out that our beliefs about the planets were implanted by a  
218 hypnotist who's indifferent to the facts about the planets. Maybe he threw  
219 a dice in implanting beliefs: if it lands n, implant the belief that there are

220 n planets. It'd then be a mistake to rely on our current planetary beliefs  
221 as evidence about the planets.

222 Singer's argument assumes a realist conception of our moral attitudes:  
223 they're about moral properties that are independent of and more fundamen-  
224 tal than our individual evaluative attitudes. For him, evolutionary influ-  
225 ences on our moral beliefs are like the influence of an indifferent hypnotist:  
226 both influences are indifferent to the truth about the subject-matter. Nei-  
227 ther sort of belief provides independent evidence about the subject-matter,  
228 because each must lack some feature that distinguishes knowledge from  
229 mere true belief. Maybe, for example, the belief isn't *safe*: there are nearby  
230 worlds where the agent forms beliefs in the same way way she actually does  
231 but where the belief is false.

232 The problem for this kind of morally unloaded interpretation is that  
233 *all* or least *enough* of our moral beliefs admit of some kind of scientific  
234 explanation or another. Evolution has deeply and pervasively influenced  
235 our moral beliefs – but so too have sociological and psychological factors,  
236 both from the societies we inhabit and from our own personality quirks.  
237 That's just the point that global debunkers like Street emphasize! Worse,  
238 those factors all seem to be indifferent to the truth about moral reality, in  
239 the way that the indifferent hypnotist is. If morally unloaded arguments  
240 succeed against deontological intuitions, they seem to succeed against all  
241 our other moral intuitions, as well.

242 Another morally unloaded interpretation is from Amia Srinivasan (2019).  
243 Her interpretation is quite general: for instance, religious beliefs are also  
244 apt for Srinivasan-style debunking. Our chances of convincing someone ini-  
245 tially sympathetic to Finnis goes down if our arguments also debunk the  
246 background religious beliefs, too. The hope of this paper is that we can do  
247 better – that we can identify something specific to moral beliefs (or rather,  
248 normative beliefs) that makes them especially apt for debunking.

249 The core feature of morally unloaded approaches is that they need  
250 *invidious distinctions* between different explanations of our moral beliefs.  
251 They need to explain why only some of our intuitions lack whatever features  
252 distinguish knowledge from mere true belief. And the prospects for drawing  
253 those invidious distinctions seem dim.<sup>2</sup> Guy Kahane concludes that “until  
254 the [global evolutionary debunking argument (EDA)] argument has been  
255 defused, [philosophers like Singer] cannot deploy local EDAs in normative  
256 ethics with a clear conscience. And even if the global argument can be  
257 resisted, it might be resisted in a way that leaves no space for EDAs of any  
258 kind” (Kahane 2009, 117)

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<sup>2</sup>Selim Berker (2009) and Guy Kahane (2011) develop these points in greater detail. Neil Sinhababu (ms) offers one sort of vindication of debunking arguments in normative ethics. But his vindication does not deliver determinate conclusions in normative ethics: in particular, it's compatible with both prioritarian hedonism and maximizing hedonism. My suggestion, by contrast, will.

259 **2 A new interpretation of local debunking arguments**

260 I introduce a new interpretation of local debunking arguments, which rests  
261 on a metaethical framework I've defended at length elsewhere (author 2020,  
262 author and X 2019). I'll here call the framework *deflationism about moral*  
263 *epistemology*.

264 **2.1 Deflationism, what**

265 Deflationism holds that evaluation of claims to moral knowledge, moral  
266 justification, and the like happen in exactly two sorts of contexts: Easy  
267 Contexts, where moral knowledge is comparatively easy to acquire, and  
268 Hard Contexts, where it's comparatively hard. Easy Contexts are the only  
269 ones that matter for the questions in this paper; I discuss Hard Contexts  
270 only to explain why they're irrelevant.

271 To introduce Easy Contexts, consider a moral relativist like Gilbert  
272 Harman. He thinks that my moral knowledge just is knowledge about my  
273 own moral code, which could be different from yours. Easy Contexts are  
274 distinctive because they're contexts where knowledge of my own code can  
275 *partially* ground moral knowledge. But deflationism isn't a kind of moral  
276 relativism; it insists that moral facts are independent of and more funda-  
277 mental than our individual evaluative attitudes. I'll stipulatively introduce  
278 the predicate 'is the moral standard' for the moral code that captures those  
279 facts.

280 The deflationist's key innovation claim about Easy Contexts is that  
281 knowledge of my own moral code can ground moral knowledge together  
282 with the state of *accepting* that the relevant part of the moral code is the  
283 moral standard. I use 'wrong<sub>c<sub>1</sub></sub>' to mean 'wrong according to c<sub>1</sub>' – so the  
284 deflationist holds, for instance, that my knowledge that killing is usually  
285 wrong can be grounded in:

- 286 • knowledge that killing is usually wrong<sub>c<sub>1</sub></sub>, plus
- 287 • accepting that the relevant part of c<sub>1</sub> is the moral standard

288 I use a singular term ('c<sub>1</sub>') to refer to my moral code, to emphasize that  
289 the attitudes are not attitudes about me.<sup>3</sup>

290 To accept a proposition is to treat it as true. Importantly, acceptance  
291 contrasts with knowledge in being a much less demanding attitude. Ac-  
292 ceptance isn't even normed by knowledge, in the way that belief plausibly  
293 is. The only general norm on acceptance is coherence, both logical and  
294 probabilistic.<sup>4</sup> Criticizing someone who's Gettiered in what they accept,  
295 say, is a mistake.

296 The final feature of Easy Contexts is that an attributor will attribute  
297 moral knowledge to an addressee only when the attributor *also* accepts that

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<sup>3</sup>The fact that c<sub>1</sub> is the code that best fits my moral beliefs figures only in the *metasemantic* explanation of why my attitudes are about that code, not in the content of the attitudes.

<sup>4</sup>See Stalnaker (2002) for a full account of this attitude.

298 the relevant part of the attributee’s moral code is the moral standard.<sup>5</sup> For  
299 example, you’ll take me to know that killings are usually wrong only if you  
300 also accept that the relevant part of  $c_1$  – the part about killing – is the  
301 moral standard. And you accept that it is if you agree with me about the  
302 considerations that make killing wrong: if you agree that killings aren’t  
303 wrong if they’re in self-defense, and even then they’re wrong if there was a  
304 non-lethal alternative, and so on. I’ll call this final feature of deflationism  
305 its DEFLATIONIST FACTIVITY.

306 DEFLATIONIST FACTIVITY guarantees that deflationism isn’t a kind  
307 of relativism. Moral relativists characteristically predict that people with  
308 inconsistent moral beliefs can both have moral knowledge. For example,  
309 they tend to predict that (\*) is true:

310 (\*) Jefferson Davis knows that slavery isn’t wrong and Freder-  
311 ick Douglass knows that slavery is wrong.

312 After all, Davis can know that his moral code permits slavery even while  
313 Douglass knows that his code forbids it. But DEFLATIONIST FACTIV-  
314 ITY guarantees that sentences like (\*) will always express something false.  
315 Someone who thinks that (\*) is true would think that the relevant parts  
316 of Douglass and Davis’ moral codes *both* line up with the moral standard.  
317 But their moral codes contradict each other about slavery, so only one can  
318 line up with the moral standard.

319 The deflationist also acknowledges Hard Contexts, where reports of  
320 moral knowledge work how you’ve always expected them to work if moral  
321 realism is true. In Hard Contexts, moral knowledge requires knowledge  
322 about the moral standard – that is, about the fundamental moral facts  
323 that moral realists posit. Admitting that there are Hard Contexts is not  
324 innovative; the deflationist’s innovation is to introduce Easy Contexts.

325 The deflationist further claims that the only way to shift someone from  
326 an Easy Context to a Hard Context is by getting them to stop accept-  
327 ing substantive propositions about the moral standard. Given this further  
328 claim, Hard Contexts will be irrelevant in this paper, as I’ll show in §3.4.

## 329 2.2 Deflationism, why

330 I’ve defended deflationism at length elsewhere (author 2020a, author and X  
331 2019). The key point is that philosophers have missed an important species  
332 of knowledge that’s grounded in facts about *presupposition*.

333 Presuppositions are commitments of an utterance that are interpreted  
334 as backgrounded and not the main point. Consider the sentence “it wasn’t  
335 Bill who ate the cookies”. Uses of that sentence are associated with the  
336 commitment that *someone* ate the cookies – if you sincerely utters it, com-  
337 petent hearers will infer that you accept that commitment. But competent

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<sup>5</sup>An important question is then: what is relevant? Answering this question also requires answering the challenges that Mark Schroeder (2009) has described for hybrid theories in metaethics. Though there are complicated issues here, I think that the literature already contains an answer that’s at least good enough for my purposes here, in Perl (2020).



338 hearers will also recognize that the main point of the utterance is elsewhere.  
339 The main point is to convey something about Bill's inactivity, rather than  
340 the current state of the cookies. In general, presuppositions are interpreted  
341 as not the main point; following Craige Roberts (2012), I'll say that they're  
342 *not-at-issue* commitments.

343 Not-at-issue commitments give rise to an interesting if unappreciated  
344 species of knowledge. Suppose that I suspect that someone did eat the  
345 cookies. Suppose further that I know that Bill didn't eat the cookies –  
346 say, because I've been watching him all day, and know that he didn't go  
347 anywhere near them. Is (\*) then true?

348 (\*) I know that it wasn't Bill who ate the cookies.

349 Given those suppositions, (\*) is true. That is, knowing the at-issue content  
350 and merely suspecting the not-at-issue content can be enough.

351 (\*) illustrates an important general lesson: that we can use knowledge  
352 reports to assert something true given knowledge of the at-issue commit-  
353 ment (that Bill didn't eat the cookies) and mere acceptance of the presup-  
354 posed, not-at-issue commitment (that someone did). (After all, suspecting  
355 something can sometimes be enough for temporarily accepting it.) Stal-  
356 naker suggested in general that *acceptance* is the attitude appropriate for  
357 not-at-issue commitments. And this kind of point is uncontroversial among  
358 linguists – Heim (1992) is a *locus classicus*, though much work builds on  
359 hers.<sup>6</sup>

360 The general point is a point specifically about the distinction between  
361 at-issue and not-at-issue commitments. Suppose that I merely suspect that  
362 Bill didn't eat the cookies, but I know that someone did. Could (\*) then  
363 be true?

364 (\*) I know that it wasn't Bill who ate the cookies.

365 No, it couldn't. In order for (\*) to be true, I do have know the at-issue  
366 content that Bill didn't eat the cookies. The felicity of (\*) under the ear-  
367 lier suppositions shows something specific about not-at-issue commitments,  
368 rather than something general about knowledge reports. If you find this  
369 point surprising, your surprise is evidence that philosophers are in general  
370 unaware of an important species of knowledge. (I'm semantically descend-  
371 ing from facts about (\*)'s assertability to conclusions about an important  
372 species of knowledge – the conclusion defends this semantic descent.)

373 Deflationism is true if the fundamental realist property *being-the-moral-*  
374 *standard* is part of a presupposed, not-at-issue commitment of moral ut-  
375 terances. Knowledge that killing is usually wrong can then be grounded  
376 in:

- 377 • knowledge that killing is usually wrong<sub>c1</sub>, plus

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<sup>6</sup>Examples include Paul Dekker (2008), Lauri Karttunen and Stanley Peters (1979), Robert van Rooij (2005, 2010), David Oshima (2006), and Yasutada Sudo (2012); author (2020b) explains why any viable account of presupposition triggers must vindicate the observations described in the main text.

378       • accepting that (the relevant part) of  $c_1$  is the moral standard

379 It can be grounded in these two states because acceptance of the not-at-  
380 issue commitment can combine with knowledge of the at-issue commitment  
381 to ground knowledge. The other distinctive features of deflationism also  
382 follow immediately.

383       • DEFLATIONIST FACTIVITY follows because ‘knows’ is a hole for pre-  
384 supposition

385       • Hard Contexts exist because presuppositions can be locally accom-  
386 modated

387       • Changing what someone accepts is the only way to shift them into  
388 a Hard Context because local accommodation only happens given  
389 changes to what’s accepted.

390 The claim that *being-the-moral-standard* is part of a presupposed, not-at-  
391 issue commitment is thus a crucial if unappreciated pivot in metaethics.  
392 And there is decisive evidence for that claim: every single moral realist  
393 must accept it to preserve the orthodox Kratzerian account of the duality  
394 of modals (author 2020a; author and X 2019). [I’m happy to expand on  
395 these points as needed.]

### 396 **3 The rationality of Easy Contexts**

397 Deflationism leaves space for local debunking because it guarantees that  
398 global debunking sometimes fails: it fails in Easy Contexts. My strategy  
399 will be to show that local debunking remains compelling in Easy Context,  
400 thereby showing how local debunking can succeed even where global de-  
401 bunking fails.

402       Global debunkers target moral realists. They do not target moral rela-  
403 tivists; they concede that we could have the sort of knowledge the relativist  
404 describes. This concession guarantees that global debunking arguments  
405 will fail in Easy Contexts. In Easy Contexts, the only kind of *knowledge*  
406 required is knowledge of the agent’s own moral code – the very kind of  
407 knowledge that debunkers concede. Now in Easy Contexts, moral knowl-  
408 edge also requires *accepting* that the relevant part of that code is the moral  
409 standard. But Easy Contexts are the contexts where I *do* so accept.<sup>7</sup>

410       My strategy would fail if we never *should* be in Easy Contexts. We’re  
411 in Easy Contexts when we accept substantive propositions about the moral  
412 standard. If Street could show that we shouldn’t accept any such proposi-  
413 tions, my strategy will fail. However, acceptance has very minimal norms.  
414 Because the norms are so minimal, it’s very hard to show that we shouldn’t  
415 accept substantive propositions about the moral standard. Reactive at-  
416 titudes are a good example. They give us the right kinds of reasons for  
417 *acceptance* even though they don’t give us the right kinds of reasons for

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<sup>7</sup>Moreover, I’ll see my self-attributions of moral knowledge as true, because the DEFLATIONIST FACTIVITY condition will *eo ipso* be satisfied as well.

418 *belief*. Suppose that I resent your unprovoked punch. This resentment is  
419 plausibly only rational if I believe that your punch was morally wrong.  
420 More generally:

421 (RATIONAL-ONLY-IF-IMMORAL): I'm rational in [resenting/being  
422 indignant/feeling guilty...] towards x for  $\phi$ -ing only if I believe  
423 it was morally wrong for x to  $\phi$

424 The RATIONAL-ONLY-IF-IMMORAL constraint gives a necessary condition  
425 on rational reactive attitudes, not a sufficient condition.

426 To motivate a necessary condition like RATIONAL-ONLY-IF-IMMORAL,  
427 we ask whether reactive attitudes would be rational without correspond-  
428 ing moral beliefs. Imagine someone who was raised Catholic, and raised  
429 to accept prohibitions on recreational sex. They have come to reject those  
430 prohibitions. But they still experience something phenomenally like guilt  
431 about recreational sex. There does seem to be something irrational about  
432 feeling guilty in this case. And RATIONAL-ONLY-IF-IMMORAL cleanly ex-  
433 plains why it would be irrational: the rationalizing moral belief is missing.<sup>8</sup>

434 Resentment and the like give us the right kinds of reason for accepting  
435 that  $c_1$  is the moral standard. Suppose that my reactive attitudes explain  
436 why I accept that  $c_1$  is the moral standard. This supposition needn't vi-  
437 olate the norms on acceptance, because the only norms on acceptance are  
438 coherentist. The norms on belief are plausibly stronger. A desire to succeed  
439 can give me the wrong kind of reason to believe that I'll succeed: I may be  
440 more likely to succeed if I believe I'll succeed. That's not the right kind of  
441 reason for belief. *Evidence* that I'll succeed is the right kind of reasons for  
442 belief, and the desire to succeed isn't evidence that I'll succeed. Similarly,  
443 resentment doesn't give me the right kind of reason for *belief* that  $c_1$  is the  
444 moral standard.

445 Crucially, though, a desire to succeed can still give me the right kind of  
446 reason to *accept* that I'll succeed, if accepting so is consistent. That's why  
447 Street's prospects for showing that we shouldn't accept substantive propo-  
448 sitions about the moral standard are so dim. Deflationism is the radical  
449 thesis that my acceptances ground my moral knowledge. If I find myself re-  
450 senting your punch, that resentment does give me the right kind of reason  
451 for acceptance, though not for belief. (A complication: since knowledge  
452 entails belief, it also gives me the right kind of reason for believing that  
453 your punch was morally wrong – though only because that belief is itself  
454 grounded in facts about what I accept.<sup>9</sup>)

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<sup>8</sup>Joseph Butler (1729) and John Rawls (1971) both accept a stronger claim: that this case doesn't involve guilt at all, because it's impossible to feel guilt in the absence of the corresponding beliefs. This stronger claim entails the weaker claim in the text, so I focus on the weaker one. See R. Jay Wallace (1998) for a more extended argument for RATIONAL-ONLY-IF-IMMORAL; he gives the Catholic example.

<sup>9</sup>Deflationism is a thesis about the nature of moral belief as well as about the nature of moral knowledge. In Easy Contexts, my belief that your punch was wrong is grounded in:

455 And I think that it's psychologically impossible for creatures like us  
456 to stably give up the reactive attitudes, or to stably regard our reactive  
457 attitudes as irrational. I think that P. F. Strawson (1974) is right that the  
458 reactive attitudes are too deeply embedded in our lives together:

459 the human commitment to participation in ordinary interper-  
460 sonal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply  
461 rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general the-  
462 oretical conviction might so change our world that, in it, there  
463 were no longer any such things as inter-personal relationships  
464 as we normally understand them; and being involved in inter-  
465 personal relationships as we normally understand them pre-  
466 cisely is being exposed to the range of reactive attitudes and  
467 feelings that is in question. (Strawson 1974, 14)

468 Now there are exceptional contexts where we abandon the reactive attitudes  
469 and step outside the participant stance. But given the sorts of creatures we  
470 are, we cannot stably occupy those contexts.<sup>10</sup> In the participant stance,  
471 we have sufficient reason for staying in Easy Contexts.

#### 472 4 Local debunking arguments

473 We've seen that global debunking fails in Easy Contexts. And the partic-  
474 ipant stance guarantees that we're sometimes rationally in Easy Contexts.  
475 This section shows how to formulate local debunking arguments in Easy  
476 Contexts. It thus shows how local debunking can be compelling where  
477 global debunking isn't.

478 My question here is like a familiar question from general epistemology.  
479 Local debunking is like the claim that I don't *know* that some particular car  
480 is red if I formed the corresponding belief in dim enough lighting. Global  
481 debunking is like the claim that *none* of my perceptual beliefs amount to  
482 knowledge because an evil demon might be causing them. Many epistemol-  
483 ogists want to find an account that vindicates the former claim but denies

- 
- belief that you punch was wrong<sub>c<sub>1</sub></sub>, plus
  - accepting that the relevant part of **c<sub>1</sub>** is the moral standard

Deflationism supports conclusions about the nature of moral belief for the same reason it supports conclusions about the nature of moral knowledge: the presuppositional thesis noted in §2.2 itself supports both those conclusions. The crucial point in the main text is that it's still only acceptance about **c<sub>1</sub>** that ultimately matters – and it's only because moral beliefs are ultimately grounded in facts about what I accept that resentment gives me the right kind of reason for my moral beliefs.

<sup>10</sup>Pamela Hieronymi (2020) distinguishes several different strands in Strawson's discussion. The most modest strand is what she calls the 'simple Humean' one, where Strawson is making a point about our bare psychological limitations (Hieronymi 2020, 47ff). Even this simple strand is enough to support what I assume in the text, though the other strands will also support it.

484 the latter. To do that, they need to give an account of what makes the  
485 good cases of perceptual belief good, and an account of what makes the  
486 bad cases bad. My ambition here is to give an account of moral knowledge  
487 that explains why the good cases are good. This account complements the  
488 suggestions that Singer and others have given in explaining why the bad  
489 cases are bad.

#### 490 4.1 Vindicating local debunking

491 My vindication of local debunking starts with a general principle about  
492 observations and evidence.

493 (EVIDENCE): If some observation  $o$  is more likely on theory  
494  $T_1$  than  $T_2$ , then  $o$  is some evidence for  $T_1$  and some evidence  
495 against  $T_2$ . But if  $o$  is equally likely on  $T_1$  as on  $T_2$ , then  $o$  is  
496 not evidence for one theory over the other.

497 Consider SURGEON:

498 (SURGEON): It's wrong for a surgeon to cut up one person to  
499 save five.

500 EVIDENCE says that SURGEON is evidence for deontological theories because  
501 it's unlikely that we would make that observation if act consequentialism  
502 is true: it's more likely that we would observe that cutting them up is  
503 required. But that observation is likely given the deontological theories.

504 My interpretation of local debunking works very differently from Singer's,  
505 canvassed earlier. He takes debunking explanations to show that the target  
506 intuition has some epistemic defect that allows us to ignore it.<sup>11</sup> I propose,  
507 in contrast, that debunking explanations *undercut* the evidence that the  
508 targeted intuition provides, rather than showing anything about the intu-  
509 ition itself. Note first that SURGEON is highly likely given the *conjunction* of  
510 its evolutionary explanation and act consequentialism, because it's highly  
511 likely given its evolutionary explanation on its own. That evolutionary  
512 explanation thus makes SURGEON as likely given act consequentialism as  
513 given some deontological alternative. On my interpretation of local debunk-  
514 ing, a local debunking of SURGEON would show that SURGEON provides no  
515 evidence for a deontological theory over act consequentialism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>But this diagnosis will fail in Easy Contexts. In those contexts, someone can accept the evolutionary explanation while still taking themselves to know SURGEON. Moral knowledge only requires knowledge of my own code while accepting it to line up with the moral standard – and the evolutionary explanation doesn't threaten either of those states. Singer's formulation of local debunking fails in Easy Contexts for the same reason that global debunking does.

<sup>12</sup>Already, my interpretation of local debunking is working differently than you probably expect. You probably expect theories in normative ethics to explain the *propositional objects* of our moral observations/ our moral intuitions. That is, an adequate theory explains why it's wrong to cut up one person to save five, not why we tend to make the observation that it's wrong. My interpretation of local

516 Now you might immediately notice that my interpretation of local de-  
517 bunking allows *all* normative theorists to debunk recalcitrant intuitions.  
518 Take an intuition that it's permissible to intentionally kill one person to  
519 save a billion. A deontological absolutist could debunk this intuition by  
520 appeal to some evolutionary explanation. Maybe groups that always refuse  
521 these sorts of trade-offs tend to die off. She could then conjoin this evo-  
522 lutionary explanation with her absolutist theory, and claim that the odds  
523 that some of us would have this intuition is high given the conjunction of  
524 the two. She could conclude that the intuition is no evidence against her  
525 theory.

526 In noting that all normative theorists are equally able to debunk recalci-  
527 trant intuitions, I am relying on a substantive assumption. The substantive  
528 assumption is that all, or enough, our intuitions have some sort of scientific  
529 explanation, or at least some sort of explanation that's relevantly similar to  
530 a scientific explanation.<sup>13</sup> This assumption was part of the framing of the  
531 paper; global debunkers like Sharon Street appeal to it. Rejecting that as-  
532 sumption is a way of distinguishing local debunking from global debunking.  
533 But as §1 emphasized, it's an *implausible* way of distinguishing them.

534 So far, I've only given the first component of my proposed interpretation  
535 of local debunking. Given what I've said so far, local debunking don't itself  
536 allow us to discriminate among normative theories. It's in principle possible  
537 for several normative theories to each offer debunking explanations that  
538 each undercut the intuitions in favor of the other theories. If that happens,  
539 it's not possible to discriminate within the remaining theories just by appeal  
540 to intuition.

## 541 4.2 Prioritize theoretical virtues

542 The next important component of my interpretation of local debunking is  
543 to use general theoretical virtues to discriminate among viable normative  
544 theories. Some theories are *simpler*; for example, act consequentialism is  
545 simpler than Rossian deontology. Other theories are comparatively elegant;  
546 Scanlon's contractualism is one example.

547 My interpretation of local debunking is then that it increases the im-  
548 portance of the general theoretical virtues by decreasing the importance of  
549 fidelity to our antecedent intuitions. It's legitimate for normative theories  
550 to debunk our antecedent intuitions, arguing that they do not provide evi-  
551 dence for one theory over another. Once we've debunked those intuitions,  
552 theoretical virtues should play a more central role in choice between nor-  
553 mative theories. Contrast W. D. Ross' claim that "loyalty to the facts is

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debunking is different. It explains our mental states (the observations) rather than their propositional objects. In general, though, one legitimate response to a recalcitrant observation is to explain the observation away, without explaining the propositional object of the observation. A scientist could argue that an observation is due to a dirty microscope. If they're right, they don't also need to explain its propositional object.

<sup>13</sup>Marxian explanations of intuitions as reflecting economic hierarchies may not be properly scientific, but I intend to include them.

554 worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplic-  
555 ity” (Ross 1930, 23). Setting aside his polemical spin: on my interpre-  
556 tation, local debunking makes simplicity worth more than loyalty to our  
557 antecedently given intuitions.

558 Now my interpretation of local debunking arguments still needs one  
559 final component. Consider PERMISSIVISM.

560 (PERMISSIVISM): everything is morally permitted

561 Permissivism is the simplest normative theory. And my interpretation of  
562 local debunking seems to predict that the Permissivist can just debunk all  
563 intuitions to the contrary. The Permissivist can argue: for each intuition,  
564 it’s as likely that we would have that intuition given her theory plus the  
565 scientific explanation of the observation as given any other theory. So the  
566 observation is no evidence against her. And Permissivism is the simplest  
567 possible normative theory.

568 It would be a disaster if my interpretation of debunking best supports  
569 Permissivism. My goal is to defend the sorts of debunking arguments that  
570 consequentialists, feminists, Marxists, disability-rights, and critical race  
571 theorists have developed. But none of them accept Permissivism – if my  
572 interpretation really leads to Permissivism, it fails.

573 The final component of my interpretation is thus a constraint on what  
574 theories local debunking can support:

575 (STABLE ACCEPTANCE CONSTRAINT): local debunking can  
576 only support normative theories that are *psychologically possi-*  
577 *ble* for us to stably accept.

578 Local debunking then can’t support Permissivism, because we can’t stably  
579 accept Permissivism. Stably accepting Permissivism would require stably  
580 abandoning the participant stance. As argued in §3, reactive attitudes like  
581 resentment and indignation are rational only for actions the agent believes  
582 to be wrong. Someone who stably accepted Permissivism – a *Permissivist*  
583 – won’t think anything is wrong. So the Permissivist should regard all his  
584 reactive attitudes as irrational. If someone punched the Permissivist out  
585 of the blue, he couldn’t see himself as rational for resenting the punch. I  
586 assume with Strawson that that degree of alienation from the participant  
587 stance isn’t psychologically possible for creatures like us.

588 Deflationism immediately supports the STABLE ACCEPTANCE CON-  
589 STRAINT. As emphasized in §1.2, local debunking is an invitation to con-  
590 clude that the etiology of an intuition prevents it from being a source of  
591 evidence. And treating an intuition as evidence in Easy Contexts involves  
592 accepting that it is the salient part of the moral standard. So given defla-  
593 tionism, local debunking in Easy Contexts must be an invitation to switch  
594 what you accept. Take the consequentialist debunking of the intuition that  
595 it’s wrong to cut up one person to save five. I interpret the consequen-  
596 tialist debunker as inviting us to start accepting that the relevant part of  
597 the moral standard requires cutting up one to save five. This invitation is  
598 justified by appeal to the relevant theoretical virtues: for example, that the

599 theory that you would start accepting is simpler than what you accepted  
600 before. And the fact that cutting up one currently seems wrong is no ev-  
601 idence against switching; local debunking undercuts the evidence that it  
602 appears to provide.

603 Importantly, the Stable Acceptance Constraint does not require any  
604 kind of anti-realism about morality. It might seem like it does, because it  
605 takes our psychological states to constrain what we take morality to be like.  
606 And I've taken moral realists to insist that moral properties are independent  
607 of and more fundamental than our individual evaluative states. But the  
608 Constraint constrains what sort of *evidence* we have, not what morality is  
609 itself like; it's a constraint in epistemology, not metaphysics. There is no  
610 danger that it would lead to moral anti-realism.

611 It's then impossible to formulate a debunking argument in favor of  
612 Permissivism. That argument would have to be an invitation to do some-  
613 thing that's psychologically impossible for creatures like us: start accepting  
614 Permissivism. The psychological impossibility of accepting Permissivism  
615 is also my diagnosis of why Permissivism is intuitively unacceptable. It's  
616 intuitively unacceptable because we couldn't imagine accepting it.

### 617 **4.3 Evidence in a deflationist setting**

618 You might worry that the preceding diagnosis of Permissivism is too weak.  
619 It's not just that we can't accept Permissivism; we also have genuine evi-  
620 dence against it: the evidence is that unprovoked punches are obviously  
621 wrong! Deflationists agree. In a Easy Contexts, we do have genuine evi-  
622 dence that unprovoked punches are obviously wrong, because we *know* that  
623 they're wrong. In Easy Contexts, moral knowledge only requires a com-  
624 bination of knowledge about my own moral code plus acceptance that the  
625 salient part of my moral code is the moral standard. Since creatures like  
626 us will stably accept that unprovoked punches are wrong, at least in Easy  
627 Contexts, we will also *know* that they're wrong.

628 Deflationism plays a central role here: it explain why we do have genuine  
629 evidence in normative ethics, evidence that's immune to to local debunking.  
630 We have genuine evidence that p when we can't stably accept that not-p.  
631 This account of our genuine evidence is radical. Without deflationism,  
632 it's very unclear why psychological facts about acceptance would have any  
633 epistemic upshots. Given deflationism, though, those psychological facts  
634 have epistemic upshots because my evidence in Easy Contexts is ultimately  
635 grounded in those psychological facts about what I accept.

636 Importantly, deflationism presents itself as a *descriptively correct* ac-  
637 count of our attributions of moral knowledge: the psychological facts just  
638 are what our genuine evidence against Permissivism has consisted in all  
639 along. In other words: if deflationism is correct, your confidence that  
640 we have genuine evidence against Permissivism just is your accepting a  
641 moral code that classifies some actions as wrong while being confident that  
642 you couldn't stably accept another code that classifies everything as per-  
643 missible. You probably reject this conclusion. But in rejecting it, you're  
644 rejecting deflationism. Then you need to confront the argument for defla-



645 tionism: that the duality of modals shows that realist must interpret the  
646 property *being-the-moral-standard* as part of a presupposed, not-at-issue  
647 commitment (author 2020a).

648 Deflationism is compatible with a highly alienated conception of our  
649 moral evidence. Even if we learned that *none* of our evidence arises from  
650 processes that reliably track moral reality, we would still have genuine moral  
651 evidence grounded in what we stably accept. Now deflationism doesn't itself  
652 incorporate a highly alienated conception of our evidence. Deflationism is  
653 true even if perfectly reliable processes explain what we accept: in the limit,  
654 it's still true even if God zaps all of us to accept all and only moral truths.  
655 It doesn't say why we accept propositions about the moral standard – it  
656 just holds that acceptance states do ground genuine moral evidence.

657 Scientific explanations of our moral beliefs are what support a highly  
658 alienated conception of our moral evidence. Think back to Singer's de-  
659 scription of those explanations – for example, think of him asking “what is  
660 the moral salience of the fact that I have killed someone in a way that was  
661 possible a million years ago, rather than in a way that became possible only  
662 two hundred years ago? I would answer: none” (Singer 2005, 348). I've  
663 assumed that the scientific explanations do support a highly alienated con-  
664 ception of our evidence. I've been concerned to explain why someone who  
665 accepts a *highly* alienated conception shouldn't be *completely* alienated in  
666 the way that Street describes. Such a person shouldn't be completely alien-  
667 ated because the participant stance will always ground genuine evidence in  
668 normative ethics.

669 If deflationism is correct, normative theorizing should proceed differ-  
670 ently, given alienating scientific explanations of our moral beliefs.

671       NORMATIVE THEORIZING: the legitimate data for normative  
672       theorizing are the intuitions that we can't stably abandon; the  
673       correct normative theory is the one that best fits that data and  
674       relevant theoretical virtues.

675 Permissivism is right out. Though simplicity favors it, it conflicts with in-  
676 tuitions we can't stably abandon. This conception of normative theorizing  
677 is more hospitable to simple theories like act consequentialism. But it's  
678 also available to other kinds of normative theories, if creatures like us can't  
679 stably accept the judgments that follow from simple theories like act con-  
680 sequentialism. In fact, I myself doubt that we can; I think it requires too  
681 great an alienation from our reactive attitudes. I think a kind of indirect  
682 consequentialism can do better. But a Kantian might argue for her theory  
683 as doing better than either, and she could be right.

684 I've promised an account of what makes the good cases of moral knowl-  
685 edge good. I thus have the same ambitions as epistemologists who want to  
686 explain why many perceptual beliefs do amount to knowledge. Now those  
687 epistemologists don't claim that ordinary agents need to do epistemology  
688 to have perceptual knowledge. They are instead explaining *why* ordinary  
689 ways of forming perceptual beliefs support perceptual knowledge. My am-  
690 bitions are the same. I want to vindicate the ordinary method of reflective  
691 equilibrium that normative ethicists use. My vindication doesn't require

692 them to reason about which judgments we can stably accept, any more than  
693 an epistemologist’s vindication of ordinary perceptual knowledge requires  
694 ordinary agents to do epistemology. I’ve rather explained why philosophers  
695 who debunk some moral intuitions are nonetheless entitled to continued use  
696 of the method of reflective equilibrium.

697 Targets of local debunking may insist that it’s not psychologically possi-  
698 ble for them to accept the argument’s conclusions. For instance, a common  
699 reactionary response to feminist challenges is to insist that we’re not ca-  
700 pable of changing social relations in the way envisioned. This reactionary  
701 response could in principle be correct. If we can’t stably accept the conclu-  
702 sion of the debunking argument, the argument fails. But I think this feature  
703 of my account is an advantage, not a cost. It explains the importance of ide-  
704 ology critique in local debunking: Catharine MacKinnon emphasizes that  
705 “women’s situation cannot be truly known for what it is, in the feminist  
706 sense, without knowing that it can be other than it is” (MacKinnon 1989,  
707 101); Charles Mills (1997) emphasizes the racial contract as a descriptive  
708 contract that reveals that things could be otherwise.

709 Of course, my account of local debunking doesn’t vindicate everything  
710 that extant local debunkers think – for instance, it won’t vindicate every-  
711 thing that Singer thinks. But it’s because I take ideology critique to play  
712 a central role in local debunking that I’m pleased that my interpretation  
713 does give it a central role.

## 714 5 Wrapping up

715 Some philosophers suffer through this paper with rising dismay. They find  
716 its conception of normative theorizing too alien, too far from what they  
717 recognize. Such philosophers are often skeptical of these sorts of debunking  
718 arguments in the first place. They are apt to press the complaints de-  
719 tailed in §1.2: that those debunking arguments either collapse into global  
720 debunking arguments or are question-begging.

721 I see this paper as vindicating a venerable tradition in the history of  
722 ethics. Allen Wood describes that tradition as involving

723 a method, which I find not only in Kant but also in utilitarians  
724 such as Bentham and Mill, that would draw the fundamental  
725 moral principle from very general and fundamental considera-  
726 tions about the nature of rational desire and action, and would  
727 then attempt to reconcile these principles with common moral  
728 opinions only insofar as those opinions can be seen as applica-  
729 tions of the principles. (Wood 2007, 59)

730 The contemporary partisans for this tradition offer debunking arguments of  
731 common moral opinions; I take the consequentialists, feminists, Marxians,  
732 and critical race theorists from §1.1 to draw from this tradition as well. In  
733 fact, Wood himself vigorously challenges the use of common moral opin-  
734 ions in contemporary trolleyology (Wood 2011, 66-82). But mainstream  
735 work in contemporary ethics characteristically ignores this tradition. Even

736 Parfit's response to Wood, a few pages later, effectively passes over it. The  
737 tradition is ignored, in part, because it's unclear why we should prioritize  
738 fundamental moral principles over common moral opinions. If you found  
739 my conception of normative theorizing too alien, you probably found the  
740 tradition too alien as well.

741 The ambition of this paper has been to provide a metaethically sound  
742 foundation for this venerable tradition and to the debunking arguments  
743 it deploys. Even if you find the resulting picture of normative theorizing  
744 too alien, you should agree that it makes progress from the current state  
745 of the literature. No extant metaethical framework vindicates those de-  
746 bunking arguments while also explaining why work in normative ethics can  
747 converge on a single, determinate answer.<sup>14</sup> And it's important to identify  
748 the best metaethical foundation for those arguments; we can then evaluate  
749 them more carefully. This paper has focused on the reactive attitudes as  
750 grounding psychologically ineliminable judgments. Other parts of moral  
751 psychology may also be ineliminable. As Wood suggests, a Kantian might  
752 argue that certain judgments are ineliminable for *rational* moral agents. I  
753 focus on the reactive attitudes only for concreteness, without meaning to  
754 suggest that they're the only possible grounds of psychologically inelim-  
755 inable judgments.

756 You may worry about a methodological question. Deflationism is a  
757 *normative* framework, about good evidence in normative ethics. But I  
758 infer that deflationism is true from descriptive evidence about our use of  
759 moral language. Some readers might worry that this inference is somehow  
760 illegitimate, because the descriptive facts are just facts about how we do  
761 attribute knowledge, rather than facts about how we should.

762 This worry is misguided. Deflationism involves a *constitutive* claim  
763 about the states that can *constitute* moral knowledge. The evidence for the  
764 constitutive claim is the linguistic evidence mentioned earlier. Crucially,  
765 though, constitutive claims are the right kind of bridge between descriptive  
766 facts and normative conclusions. Compare standard non-cognitivist vindi-  
767 cation of normative judgment internalism: inferring from the descriptive  
768 claim that non-cognitive states constitute normative judgments to the nor-  
769 mative claim that *rational* agents who judge that eating meat is wrong are  
770 motivated to not eat meat. This explanation has the exact same structure  
771 as the proposal in this paper: in both cases, constitutive claims support  
772 normative conclusions. If you're willing to credit non-cognitivism with an  
773 explanation of normative judgment internalism, you should also credit de-  
774 flatonism with an explanation of the difference between local and global  
775 debunking.

776 My interpretation of these debunking arguments has two central virtues

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<sup>14</sup>Neil Sinhababu (ms) offers one sort of vindication of debunking arguments in normative ethics. But his vindication does not deliver determinate conclusions in normative ethics: both prioritarian hedonism and maximizing hedonism could still be true. And there is no way to determine which is correct. My account, by contrast, does give us a method for resolving all disputes in normative ethics. Moreover, his account can't possibly vindicate Kantian debunking arguments, while mine can – a wider range of philosophers can find my account defensible.

777 that make it an especially promising vindicating of the tradition Wood de-  
778 scribes. First, it cleanly solves the basic philosophical challenge. It explains  
779 why local debunking won't rationalize global debunking arguments. Global  
780 debunking arguments can only be compelling in Hard Contexts, while local  
781 debunking is compelling even in Easy Contexts. Our commitment to the  
782 participant stance guarantees that we will rationally be in Easy Contexts.  
783 Deflationism thus guarantees that there are contexts where local debunking  
784 is compelling but where global debunking isn't.

785 Second, my interpretation is highly principled. It follows immediately  
786 from a simple and principled thesis: that the commitment about funda-  
787 mental moral reality is part of a presupposed, not-at-issue commitment. In  
788 fact, many readers will implicitly appeal to a version of this thesis when  
789 thinking about another question. The claim that gratuitously infliction of  
790 pain is wrong seems obvious in some contexts. If a normative theory doesn't  
791 vindicate it, we would think that that theory is obviously mistaken. But J.  
792 L. Mackie's error theory isn't obviously mistaken in the same way, though  
793 it also conflicts with this claim. It's natural to distinguish the "first-order"  
794 and "second-order" commitments of the claim about pain, and say that only  
795 the former are obvious. That's why we'll immediately reject a normative  
796 theory that conflicts with the claim, though we won't immediately reject  
797 a metaethical theory that does. Philosophers like Ronald Dworkin (1996)  
798 and Matthew Kramer (2009) reject this distinction, of course; they use the  
799 claim as evidence against Mackie. I only mean to address only those of you  
800 who disagree with them and accept a first-order/ second-order distinction.

801 In joint work, I've argued that the presuppositional claim is the best ex-  
802 planation of the first-order/ second-order distinction. When Mackie denies  
803 that the claim is obvious, he's in a Hard Context where the presupposi-  
804 tion about fundamental moral reality is *locally accommodated*. But when  
805 the presupposition isn't locally accommodated, we're in an Easy Context.  
806 And in those contexts, the claim about gratuitous infliction of pain will be  
807 obvious. As a result, my metaethical framework should look like one of the  
808 most natural ways to explain the difference between local debunking and  
809 global debunking. It's natural to think that local debunking involves *first-*  
810 *order*, normative arguments, and that global debunking involves *second-*  
811 *order*, metaethical arguments. My interpretation of local debunking rests  
812 on the best explanation of the first-order/ second-order distinction, from  
813 the presuppositional thesis.

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