An epistemology for moral naturalists

Abstract: This paper introduces a new way for moral naturalists to explain our moral knowledge. Several of the most pressing challenges for moral naturalism are in moral epistemology, and this paper shows how those problems can be solved. The ambition is to increase the overall plausibility of any kind of moral naturalism, by reducing the costs that the naturalist incurs in moral epistemology.

Natural sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology are impressively successful. Their success convinces many of us that there are physical, chemical, and biological facts that are independent of and more fundamental than our methods for discovering them.\(^1\) Moreover, it’s natural to take their success to suggest a general strategy for establishing a domain D of facts as independent of and more fundamental than our methods for investigating them. The strategy is to show that the D-facts are saliently similar to physical, chemical and biological facts. Since we say that physics, chemistry, and biology are natural sciences, it’s natural to say that a proponent of this strategy is a naturalist about the D-facts.

Many of us believe that moral facts are independent of and more fundamental than our methods for discovering them. The naturalist strategy is an attractive way to vindicate this belief. It’s thus unsurprising that recent metaethics has seen a broad range of naturalist views. One way to be a naturalist is to hold that the real definition of moral properties includes only natural properties. Another way to be a naturalist is to hold that moral properties are reducible to natural properties. And yet another way is to hold that moral properties are composed of natural properties. And there are other options, too.\(^2\)

\(^1\)Not everyone, of course – not Bas van Fraassen (1980).

\(^2\)I intend to be ecumenical in my characterization of naturalists, including both reductive and non-reductive naturalists; for illuminating discussion, see McPherson (2015). There are also lots of options about which natural facts the naturalist should use – whether to use facts about our desires, as Mark Schroeder (2007) suggests, or facts about welfare, as Peter Railton (1986) and Richard Boyd (1988) suggest, or teleological facts about natural life form of our species, as Philippa Foot (2001) and Michael Thompson (2012) suggest.
I’ve introduced moral naturalism as a thesis about moral *metaphysics*. It’s an account of what moral facts are, and of why they are independent of and more fundamental than our methods for discovering them. But it’s natural to think that this metaphysical thesis has important upshots for moral *epistemology*. For one thing, it seems like we can only know natural facts *a posteriori*, as a result of investigating the natural world. So if moral facts are natural facts, it seems like we should only be able to know moral facts *a posteriori*.

Unfortunately, though, the upshots for moral epistemology look implausible. For one thing, it seems like we can know some moral facts *apriori*; for example, we know *apriori* that the fact that an action causes pain is a reason not to do it. Inasmuch as the naturalist predicts otherwise, her view isn’t very plausible.

This paper shows how a new approach to moral epistemology would allow moral naturalists to capture the intuitive hallmarks of moral knowledge.

1 **Aprioricity**

The problem about *apriori* moral knowledge is especially pressing because of the range of moral knowledge that’s plausibly *apriori*. For example, it’s plausibly *apriori* that the fact that I promised to *φ* would be a reason to *φ*. Even though some naturalists can vindicate some kinds of *apriori* moral knowledge, they are hard-pressed to vindicate other kinds. A naturalist like David Lewis (1989) holds that the most basic truths about value are analytic – for example and very roughly, that it’s analytic that something is valuable iff it’s what we would desire to desire. Since things that are analytic are knowable *apriori*, he can explain how some very basic moral truths are knowable *apriori*.

Unfortunately, though, such analytic naturalists are ill-positioned to capture all the moral truths that are plausibly *apriori*. Lewis’ account, for example, only entails conclusions about promises in combination with further empirical facts that are not knowable *apriori*. Now naturalists can capture more *apriori* truths by extending the claims that they take to be analytic. Indeed, that is just what philosophers like Frank Jackson (1998) have suggested.

But thoroughgoing analytic naturalism faces debilitating challenges. It ends up either being implausible conservative or abandoning its naturalist ambitions. If it classifies all the truths that we currently take to be *apriori* to be analytic, it’s implausibly conservative: it doesn’t allow that some of our current convictions might be
mistaken. In general, something that would only be knowable *apriori* were it true can be false. That’s what a deviant logician would say about whatever classic inference rule she rejects – say, *reductio*. But such cases do not plausibly involve sentences that are not analytic but could have been analytic. If they did, possibilities where the sentences are true are possibilities where the sentences have different meanings. And the deviant logician isn’t using words with different meanings than the classical logician; the logicians agree about the meaning of ‘not’, but disagree about how to prove sentences containing it. The same point is plausible in moral cases: you and I can disagree about something that would only be knowable *apriori* without using terms with different meanings.3

Alternatively, analytic naturalists can focus on what would be analytic in *mature* moral theory, allowing that our current moral theory needn’t be mature. But in that case, they’re introducing an irreducibly normative term (‘mature’) that isn’t given naturalist reduction.4 It’s reasonable to conclude that extant naturalists haven’t vindicate the *aprioricity* of all the truths that we take to be knowable *apriori*.

## 2 Describing neo-contextualism

This section describes a view about moral knowledge that has been defended in Perl (2019) and Perl and Schroeder (2019). This paper builds on their work. Their emphasis is on general questions in moral epistemology and particular questions about the error theory. The ambition of this paper is to display an upshot of their approach that they do not discuss. The view allows any moral naturalist whatsoever to capture the §1 hallmarks.5

The new view resembles the contextualist theories of knowledge that Stewart Cohen (1999) and Keith DeRose (2002) pioneered. It agrees with them that moral knowledge is easier to acquire in some

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3W. V. O. Quine (1936) and Timothy Williamson (2003) develop related points about logic with particular force. Now Jackson may contest some of them. But he would very much be on the back foot – if a naturalist vindication of the *aprioricity* of moral knowledge requires contesting these points, we should be extremely pessimistic about its prospects.

4Stephen Yablo (2000) forcefully makes this point.

5Some philosophers have attempted to show that moral naturalism does not have distinctive consequences for moral epistemology, but they have restricted their accounts to defenses of *non-reductive* naturalism. (Robert Audi (1997) is one example.) My ambitions are quite different from theirs. I want to develop a picture of moral epistemology without making any assumptions whatsoever about the naturalist’s metaphysical commitments.
contexts than others. And like them, its motivation is linguistic. It thus faces the same methodological concerns about using linguistic evidence to support conclusions in epistemology. But its linguistic motivation is very different from the motivation for traditional contextualism. Traditional contextualists posit context sensitivity in what ‘knows’ contributes; the new view, by contrast, posits context sensitivity in what the complement of a report of moral knowledge contributes. Even if you reject the contextualist’s linguistic claim, you should still accept the linguistic claim that motivates the new contextualist view.

The new view is a view only about moral knowledge. It is decidedly not a view about knowledge of the external world or anything else. Unlike traditional contextualism, it recognizes only two kinds of contexts: Easy Contexts, where moral knowledge is comparatively easy to acquire, and Hard Contexts, where moral knowledge is comparatively hard to acquire. This paper will call the new view neo-contextualism – “neo” to mark that it’s not a traditional kind of contextualism, any more than neo-Humeans about practical reason accept Hume’s view. The contribution of this paper is to show that any moral naturalist whatsoever can explain the three hallmarks in Easy Contexts and that what happens in Hard Contexts is simply irrelevant.

2.1 Characterizing Easy and Hard Contexts

Easy Contexts are contexts where moral knowledge is grounded in mental states that are comparatively easy to acquire.

Consider the rules of a game like chess. The right dispositional beliefs can give me knowledge about those rules. Suppose I believe that a bishop may only be moved diagonally, and believe that a bishop may not jump over another piece, and finally believe that a bishop may capture any enemy piece on an unobstructed diagonal. As long as I am stable in those beliefs, I know that according to the rules of chess, a bishop may capture any enemy piece on an unobstructed diagonal. My dispositional beliefs about the rules ground knowledge about the rules. (They don’t ground linguistic knowledge that those rules are rules of a game called “chess”, but that’s a different point.)

A metaethical relativist might make a similar claim. The relativist might claim that we all have our own moral codes, and that we can each know about our own moral codes in roughly the same way that we know about the rules of a game like chess. I have a range of

6See, for example, Hilary Kornblith (2000).
dispositional moral beliefs: for example, I’m disposed to believe that killings are usually forbidden, and also believe that killings in self-defense are permissible, and also believe that killings in self-defense are forbidden if there are non-lethal alternatives. My moral code \( c_1 \) is the code that fits my moral beliefs most closely. And I can know that \( c_1 \) usually forbids killing in virtue of my dispositional moral beliefs. The relativist adds that ordinary moral knowledge just is knowledge about the salient moral code; my knowing that killing is usually forbidden just is knowing that \( c_1 \) usually forbids killing.

According to neo-contextualism, the sort of knowledge the relativist describes can partially ground moral knowledge in Easy Contexts. But neo-contextualism is not a relativist view: the knowledge the relativist describes cannot fully ground moral knowledge. Neo-contextualism also holds that there are moral facts that are independent of and more fundamental than our moral codes. I’ll say that the a moral code that lines up with those facts is the moral standard. Even in Easy Contexts, knowledge of my own moral code can ground moral knowledge only in combination with a further attitude about the moral standard.

In particular, moral knowledge also requires accepting that the relevant part of my moral code lines up with the moral standard. For example, knowing that killing is usually wrong can be grounded in the following two states:

- knowledge that \( c_1 \) usually forbids killing, plus
- accepting that the relevant part of \( c_1 \) lines up with the moral standard

I’ll use a singular term (‘\( c_1 \)’) to refer to my moral code, to emphasize that the attitudes are not attitudes about myself. They are about a particular code \( c_1 \) – the fact that \( c_1 \) 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.

The attitude of acceptance plays a central role in neo-contextualism. Acceptance contrasts with knowledge in being a much less demanding attitude. To accept a proposition is to treat it as true. And acceptance is not normed by knowledge, in the way that belief plausibly is. The only general norm on acceptance is coherence, both logical and probabilistic.\(^7\) You can appropriately criticize what someone accepts if it’s inconsistent with other things that they accept or believe. It’s inappropriate to criticize them for other reasons. For example,

\(^7\)See Stalnaker (2002) for a full account of this attitude.
it’s inappropriate to criticize someone who’s Gettiered in what they accept.

So in Easy Contexts, the only kind of knowledge required for moral knowledge is knowledge of something that’s metaphysically innocuous. Even an error theorist like J. L. Mackie would acknowledge that we could have that metaphysically innocuous knowledge. Mackie should acknowledge that we can know about the rules of chess. There’s nothing “spooky” about them. But parity of reasoning should lead him to acknowledge the same point about each of our own moral codes. Such knowledge also doesn’t involve anything spooky. It’s the same sort of thing as the rules of chess; just like the rules of chess tell you what’s permitted in chess, \( c_1 \) says what’s permitted according to \( c_1 \). Neither sort of knowledge is spooky. Now moral knowledge does require accepting something that Mackie would see as spooky; it requires accepting that \( c_1 \) is the moral standard. But it doesn’t require knowledge of something spooky.

The final feature of Easy Contexts is that an attributor will attribute moral knowledge to an attributee only when the attributor herself accepts the same proposition that the attributee accepts. For example, you’ll take me to know that killings are usually wrong only if you also accept that the relevant part of \( c_1 \) lines up with the moral standard. And you accept that proposition if you agree with me about the considerations that make killing wrong: if you agree that killings are wrong unless they’re in self-defense, and even then they’re wrong if there was a non-lethal alternative, and so on. I’ll call this final feature of neo-contextualism its Factivity: an attributor attributes moral knowledge only when she also accepts that the two mental states both have true propositional objects.

Factivity guarantees that neo-contextualism is not a kind of relativism. Moral relativists characteristically predict that people with inconsistent moral beliefs can both have moral knowledge. For example, they tend to predict that (*) is true:

\[ (*) \text{ Jefferson Davis knows that slavery isn’t wrong and} \]
\[ \text{Frederick Douglass knows that slavery is wrong.} \]

After all, Davis can know that his moral code permits slavery even while Douglass knows that his code forbids it. But Factivity guarantees that sentences like (*) will always be false. Someone who thinks that (*) is true would think that the relevant parts of Douglass and Davis’ moral codes both line up with the moral standard. But their moral codes contradict each other about slavery, so only
one can line up with the moral standard. Anyone who thinks (*) is true is making a mistake.

I now turn to Hard Contexts. In Hard Contexts, moral knowledge does require knowledge and not mere acceptance about the moral standard – about the fundamental moral facts that moral realists posit. More prosaically: Hard Contexts are contexts where moral knowledge works just like you’ve always expected moral knowledge to work if moral realism is true. A key innovation in this paper is to introduce Easy Contexts. You’re already familiar with Hard Contexts.

The final key innovation in neo-contextualism is in its account of shifts between Easy Contexts and Hard Contexts. The only way to shift someone into a Hard Context from an Easy Context is to get them to stop accepting substantive propositions about the moral standard. This aspect of neo-contextualism has nothing in common with familiar kinds of contextualism. For example, David Lewis (1996) incorporates a ‘Rule of Attention’ to determine shifts into higher-standards contexts. In the present setting, a Rule of Attention would mean that I’m in a Hard Context if I’m paying attention to the possibility that $c_1$ might not be the moral standard. Neo-contextualism does not incorporate a Rule of Attention or anything similar. Getting me to stop accepting substantive propositions is the only way to shift me into a Hard Context.

2.2 Motivating neo-contextualism

At this point, you might see a glimmer of why neo-contextualism allows naturalists to capture the hallmarks from §1. The upshot of §1 was that it’s easier to acquire moral knowledge than it is to acquire knowledge of the properties that naturalists identify. Easy Contexts would allow naturalists to explain why moral knowledge is easy to acquire. In Easy Contexts, moral knowledge just doesn’t require knowledge of the naturalist’s fundamental properties; it only requires accepting propositions about those properties.

Before fleshing out this glimmer, though, I want explain why neo-contextualism is worth taking seriously in the first place. The main line of evidence has already been published in Perl (2019); I’ll give a brief summary of his argument here. The summary will assume a high level of familiarity with contemporary linguistics; the published work gives a more leisurely presentation. The line of evidence arises

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8For the relevant background, see Nirit Kadmon (2001) and Kai von Fintel and Irene Heim (ms).
from the work that Angelika Kratzer (1977, 1981, 2012) has done on
the semantics of words like ‘required’, ‘ought’, ‘permissible’, and the
like. She takes contexts to supply an ordering source that combines
with the semantics for those words to determine a complete, truth-
 evaluable proposition.

At first, it’s hard to see how a language that contains terms with
Kratzer’s semantics has the expressive power to formulate the de-
bate between moral naturalists and moral non-naturalists. Given
that semantics, the fact that killing is usually wrong is the fact that
killings usually don’t happen in the worlds that some ordering source
ranks highest. And ordering sources can be characterized just with
sets of naturalistically acceptable propositions that generate rank-
ings of possible worlds, or something similar. But naturalists and
non-naturalists are not disagreeing about the nature of rankings on
possible worlds, nor about the nature of these sets of propositions.

Fortunately, though, the metaethical debate about moral natu-
ralism can be expressed even given Kratzer’s semantics. The par-
ties to the metaethical debate are not disagreeing about the nature
of a Kratzerian ordering source. Nor are they necessarily disagree-
ing about which Kratzerian ordering source captures the demands
of morality; they might agree on every normative question. They
are instead disagreeing about the explanation why that Kratzerian
ordering source captures the demands of morality. The naturalist
thinks the explanation is that the ordering source has the natural
property/ properties that constitute being the demands of morality,
and the non-naturalist thinks that the ordering source has the non-
natural property/ properties that constitute being the demands of
morality.

So naturalists and non-naturalists can both accept Kratzer’s se-
mandics by positing further normative facts, and taking a particular
Kratzerian ordering source to capture the demands of morality be-
cause it has the right kind of relationship to those normative facts.
Picking up on the earlier use, I’ll use the predicate “is the moral
standard” to refer to the property of having the right kind of rela-
tionship to those further normative facts. So I will say that natu-
ralists and non-naturalists disagree about the nature of the property
being-the-moral-standard. The naturalist takes the property to be a
fully natural property, and the non-naturalist disagrees.

Given this approach, the moral use of “killing is usually wrong”
might communicate a singular proposition about an ordering source.

(*) $o_1$ is the moral standard and $\forall w: o_1$ ranks $w$ highest
(killings usually don’t happen in $w$)
Here’s a way to illustrate what the first conjunct in (*) means. It’s possible that \( o_1 \) classifies an action as required by \( o_1 \) iff it produces the best outcome, permitted by \( o_1 \) iff it produces one of several best outcomes, and forbidden by \( o_1 \) otherwise. In that case, the proposition that \( o_1 \) is the moral standard entails that some kind of act consequentialism is true. Alternatively, it’s possible that \( o_1 \) classifies an action as forbidden by \( o_1 \) iff it would be disallowed by any set of principles that no one could reasonably reject, and required iff...—in that case, the proposition that \( o_1 \) is the moral standard entails that Scanlonian contractualism is true.

But the moral use of “killing is usually wrong” might communicate other propositions, as well.

- \( \exists x: x \text{ is the moral standard} \) (\( \forall w: x \text{ ranks } w \text{ highest} \) (killings usually don’t happen in } w))
- \( \text{the } x: x \text{ is the moral standard} \) (\( \forall w: x \text{ ranks } w \text{ highest} \) (killings usually don’t happen in } w))

So far, I haven’t said anything that should be controversial. I’ve just described the main options for moral realists to adopt the standard semantics for words like ‘permissible’ and ‘wrong’.

Neo-contextualism follows from one further thesis. The further thesis is that the realist property being-the-moral-standard is part of a presupposition of moral utterances, rather than part of the foregrounded, at-issue content associated with those utterances. This thesis leads to neo-contextualism because acceptance and not knowledge is the norm on presupposition. Consider the following minimal pair:

(a) I don’t know whether someone ate the cookies. But I’ll accept for now that someone did. (b) I definitely know that it wasn’t Bill who ate the cookies. I’ve been watching him all day, and he went nowhere near them.

(c) I don’t know whether Bill ate the cookies. But I’ll accept for now that he didn’t. * (d) I definitely know that it wasn’t Bill who ate the cookies. The plate is empty, so someone ate the cookies.

The sentence “it wasn’t Bill who ate the cookies” is associated with the presupposition that someone ate the cookies— it’s inappropriate to use the sentence unless you accept that presupposition. (b) is appropriate because acceptance is the norm on presupposition, even
under knowledge reports. By contrast, (d) is inappropriate, because knowledge reports do require knowledge of the non-presupposed, at-issue commitment that Bill didn’t eat the cookies.

Irene Heim (1992) developed the benchmark explanation of presupposition triggers under attitude reports. (The generalization just described is uncontroversial; her task is to explain it.) She holds, roughly, that "A V-es that S" can be true iff the propositions that A V-es plus the presuppositions of S that A accepts together entail that S. The presupposition of (b)’s complement that I accept is that someone ate the cookies. That proposition combines with my knowledge that Bill didn’t eat the cookies to entail that it wasn’t Bill who ate the cookies – that’s the reason why (b) is true.

Now go back to the claim that the realist property being-the-moral-standard is part of a presupposition of moral utterances. Then the mental states that matter in Easy Contexts would be sufficient for moral knowledge.

- knowledge that $c_1$ usually forbids killing, plus
- accepting that the relevant part of $c_1$ lines up with the moral standard

Suppose that $c_1$ usually forbids killing and that the presupposition that the relevant part of $c_1$ lines up with the moral standard is true. It follows that each of three propositions that moral realists could associate with the moral use of ‘killing is usually wrong’ would also be true. For example, \([\text{x: x is the moral standard}] (\forall w: \text{w is one of the worlds that x ranks highest}) (\text{killings usually don’t happen in w})\) would then be true. So the presuppositional thesis combines with any account like Heim’s to predict that these mental states can ground moral knowledge. The presuppositional thesis thus predicts that there are Easy Contexts where these two mental states can ground moral knowledge.10

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9 I’m simplifying slightly, combining features of her account with a point that Stalnaker (2002) emphasizes.

10 The presuppositional thesis also explains the Factivity requirement, that a report of moral knowledge requires the speaker to agree about the proposition accepted. Given the presuppositional thesis, ‘killing is usually wrong’ presupposes that the relevant part of $c_1$ lines up with the moral standard. And ‘knows’ is a hole for presupposition – a knowledge attribution is appropriately assertable only if the speaker also accepts the presupposition. And in Easy Contexts, the speaker only needs to accept that the relevant part of $c_1$ lines up with the moral standard, not that the entirety of $c_1$ lines up. There are nice technical questions about what is ‘relevant’, questions that are bound up with the challenges that Mark
The presuppositional thesis also predicts that there are Hard Contexts where moral knowledge requires knowledge about the moral standard. Those contexts are contexts where the presupposition is locally accommodated. A presupposition is locally accommodated when it is interpreted as an object of the matrix attitude. Ordinarily, someone who says ‘I hope it wasn’t Bill who ate the cookies’ needn’t hope that someone ate the cookies. But in some exceptional contexts, someone could say that to communicate a hope that someone who wasn’t Bill ate the cookies – if, for example, there’s a prize for eating cookies and you hope that Bill didn’t get it. Those exceptional contexts are contexts where the presupposition is locally accommodated. Hard Contexts are contexts where the presupposition that the relevant part of \( c_1 \) lines up with the moral standard is locally accommodated under a knowledge report.

I earlier claimed that the only way to end up in a Hard Context is to stop accepting substantive propositions about the moral standard. The presuppositional thesis explains why. Local accommodation happens only when the subject of the attitude report doesn’t accept the presupposition of the complement. Suppose I do accept that someone ate the cookies. If I say ‘I hope it wasn’t Bill who ate them’, the hope expressed is not a hope about someone’s eating them. The hope expressed is just the hope that Bill didn’t eat them.

Neo-contextualism is well worth taking seriously. It’s not an ad hoc response to the epistemic challenges to moral naturalism. It has an altogether independent motivation, from the presuppositional thesis. Since the presuppositional thesis is true, all moral realists should assume neo-contextualism: naturalists and non-naturalists both. So if neo-contextualism allows naturalists to vindicate the §1 hallmarks, naturalists are home free.

3 Vindicating the hallmarks of moral knowledge

Easy Contexts are the only ones that matter for the evaluation of moral naturalism. When a non-naturalist argues for one of the hallmarks of moral knowledge, she is imagining herself with some piece of moral knowledge. But her taking herself to have that piece of moral knowledge reveals that she is in an Easy Contexts. Hard Contexts are contexts where the speaker doesn’t accept that relevant part of the moral code lines up with the moral standard. If someone takes Schroeder (2009) describes. But I think those questions and challenges have been cleanly answered by Perl (2018); I intend the vagueness here about the ‘relevant part’ of \( c_1 \) to be filled in the way he suggests there.
herself to have moral knowledge, she is accepting just that. So the contexts where the §1 hallmarks are plausible must be Easy Contexts.

This section will show how moral naturalists can capture all the §1 hallmarks in Easy Contexts.

3.1 Contrast with Jackson’s analytic functionalism

I’ll begin by contrasting neo-contextualism with Frank Jackson’s analytic functionalism. I earlier described a troubling dilemma for analytic functionalism that prevented analytic functionalism from capturing the §1 hallmarks. When we see how neo-contextualism escapes the dilemma, we’ll be able to see how it captures the key hallmarks.

The dilemma is that analytic functionalism is either implausibly conservative, or abandons its naturalist ambitions. The neo-contextualist account of moral knowledge in Easy Contexts is somewhat like an extremely conservative version of analytic functionalism, where all the moral sentences that I consistently accept are analytic for me. That extremely conservative view has two key commonalities with the neo-contextualist account in Easy Contexts:

**Commonalities between extreme analytic functionalism and knowledge in Easy Contexts**

- “Abortion is permissible” carry a commitment that is analytically true for one person but analytically false for another person. On two-standard neo-contextualism, it’s associated with the commitment that \( c_1 \) permits abortion – and that commitment is analytically true. It’s constitutive of \( c_1 \) that it permits abortion; \( c_1 \) is the code that best fits my current beliefs.

- The knowledge required for moral knowledge is knowledge of a commitment that’s analytically true.

The key difference between neo-contextualism and extreme analytic functionalism is that extreme analytic functionalism holds that the analytically true/analytically false commitments are the only commitments associated with sentences like “abortion is permissible”. That’s why extreme analytic functionalism entails that my current moral convictions can’t be mistaken. All those convictions are analytically true, so a language where they’re not analytically true is a language where words like “permissible” mean something different.

Neo-contextualism works very differently, even in Easy Contexts. Sentences like “abortion are permissible” are also associated with
a second commitment: that \( c_1 \) is the moral standard. And that commitment is neither analytically true nor analytically false, even though the first commitment about what \( c_1 \) permits is analytically true. So neo-contextualism allows that my current moral convictions can be mistaken, because the second commitment can be false. To illustrate: I once thought that eating factory-farmed meat was permissible, and I now deny that it is. And I deny that I knew what I believed. I am disagreeing with my former self about the fundamental realist property being-the-moral-standard. Where \( c_0 \) is my former code that permitted eating factory-farmed meat, I once accepted that \( c_0 \) is the moral standard. I now accept that \( c_0 \) is not the moral standard – which is why I’ll deny that I knew that eating factory-farmed meat is permissible, even in Easy Contexts.

**Differences between extreme analytic functionalism and neo-contextualism**

- On neo-contextualism, moral sentences carry a commitment that is *not* analytically true for anyone. That commitment is about fundamental moral reality, about the moral standard.
- On extreme analytic functionalism, moral sentences only carry commitments that are analytically true or analytically false.\(^{11}\)
- So for extreme analytic functionalism, any moral disagreement is immediately semantic disagreement, about the meaning of a word. On two-standard neo-contextualism, by contrast, moral disagreement isn’t semantic disagreement. It’s always disagreement about the commitment about fundamental moral reality.
- On neo-contextualism, moral knowledge doesn’t require knowledge of all the commitments of the complement. It instead requires knowledge of one and mere acceptance of the other. By contrast, extreme analytic functionalists do take moral knowledge to require knowledge of all the commitments of the complement.

It’s the last bullet-point that captures the key explanatory difference between neo-contextualism and extreme analytic functionalism. Be-

\(^{11}\)I’m here focusing just on purely moral sentences, and setting aside sentences that mix the descriptive and normative, like “kicking cats is cruel”.

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cause neo-contextualism allows that the complement of a knowledge report carries a commitment that isn’t analytically true, the account allows that moral disagreement isn’t disagreement about the meaning of a word.

So even though neo-contextualism looks similar to extreme analytic functionalism, I think that the similarities are in the end superficial. Neo-contextualism denies that any propositions about fundamental moral reality are analytic. So it has exactly the same account of moral disagreement as any other synthetic realist view. Its key innovation is that moral knowledge doesn’t require knowledge of the proposition that we’re disagreeing about; it only requires acceptance of it. The only kind of knowledge required is knowledge about something that’s analytically true or analytically false.

### 3.2 Aprioricity

I can now explain how neo-contextualism captures the three hallmarks of moral knowledge in Easy Contexts. The first hallmark of moral knowledge is that it’s available apriori, at least in some instances. For example, it seems like I can know apriori that the fact that I’ve promised to φ would be a reason to φ. But we don’t learn about natural facts apriori; we only learn about them a posteriori. The challenge to the naturalist is to explain the aprioricity of moral knowledge if moral facts are natural facts.

In Easy Contexts, moral knowledge is a combination of two states: knowledge and acceptance. So apriori knowledge is also going to be a combination of two different states. Apriori knowledge that killing is usually wrong would be apriori knowledge that c₁ usually forbids killing plus mere acceptance that c₁ is the moral standard. That is, it’s a combination of apriori knowledge and a psychological state – the state of acceptance. That’s the only way to think about apriori moral knowledge if neo-contextualism is correct. Aprioricity in the sense that interests us is a property of epistemic states, like knowledge or justification: it tells us how the epistemic properties are available. So it’s not a property of prosaic attitudes, like beliefs or acceptance.¹²

¹²Talk about acceptance apriori involves a category mistake, on the intended interpretation of apriori. Someone could intelligibly talk about belief apriori, or acceptance apriori. But they are talking about a different notion of aprioricity: a notion of how we come to form the attitude. Beliefs apriori are beliefs formed independently of sensory experience. And it’s much less plausible that our moral beliefs are apriori in that sense. Most of us probably acquired the concept of pain, or the concept of killing, from sensory experience. It’s not very plausible
And neo-contextualism predicts that I can know about $c_1$ apriori—roughly, because propositions about its demands are analytic for me. It’s helpful to compare my knowledge about $c_1$ to inferential-role vindications of logical knowledge, of the sort that Paul Boghossian (2000) defends. Nobody doubts that inferential-role accounts vindicate apriori logical knowledge. Since neo-contextualism has a structure that parallels those accounts, nobody should doubt that it also vindicates apriori knowledge about $c_1$. Now in acquiring logical knowledge, you sometimes need to interact with the world. Maybe you memorize inference rules or a truth-table from a textbook. However, once you’ve become competent with the logical connectives, you can rely on your competence with them to know things apriori. Similarly, my interactions with the world may shape my moral code $c_1$. But once I’m stable in accepting some particular code like $c_1$, I can have apriori knowledge about its demands.

The key point is that moral knowledge doesn’t require knowledge of whether $c_1$ is the moral standard. So even if the property being-the-moral-standard is a natural property, moral knowledge still wouldn’t require knowledge of any natural properties. So it could still be available apriori.

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that moral beliefs involving those concepts are apriori.

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