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3 Epistemic modesty in ethics

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7 **Abstract** Many prominent ethicists, including Shelly Kagan, John Rawls, and Thomas
8 Scanlon, accept a kind of epistemic modesty thesis concerning our capacity to carry out
9 the project of ethical theorizing. But it is a thesis that has received surprisingly little
10 explicit and focused attention, despite its widespread acceptance. After explaining why
11 the thesis is true, I argue that it has several implications in metaethics, including, espe-
12 cially, implications that should lead us to rethink our understanding of Reductive Real-
13 ism. In particular, the thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics implies a kind of epistemic
14 modesty about the metaphysical nature of ethics, if Reductive Realism about the meta-
15 physical nature of ethics is true, and it implies that normative concepts are indispensable
16 to practical deliberation in a way that answers an influential objection to Reductive
17 Realism from Jonathan Dancy, David Enoch, William FitzPatrick, and Derek Parfit.

18
19 **Keywords** Normative ethics · Metaethics · Metaphilosophy · Normative Concepts ·
20 Reductive Realism · Robust Realism

21 “Working out the terms of moral justification is an unending task”.
22 Thomas Scanlon (1998: 361)

23
24 “...the process of evaluation and justification [of theories in ethics]
25 can perhaps never be completely finished”.
26 Shelly Kagan (1998: 16)

27
28 “Taking [ethical theorizing] to the limit, one seeks the conception, or plurality of
29 conceptions, that would survive the rational consideration of all feasible conceptions
30 and all rational arguments for them. We cannot,
31 of course, actually do this...”.
John Rawls (1974: 289)

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32 1 Introduction

33 There are many concerns about the epistemology of ethical theorizing that ethicists
 34 tend to bracket. It is not common to find ethicists beginning articles or books with
 35 responses to epistemological objections from disagreement or evolution before
 36 engaging in ethical theorizing, for example. Ethicists appear to proceed on the
 37 reasonable assumption that such objections can be successfully met another day. Yet
 38 the epigraphs indicate that there is one concern about the epistemology of ethical
 39 theorizing that many prominent ethicists concede—a concern about our capacity to
 40 carry out the project of ethics to its limit. But while it is often conceded, it is a
 41 concern that has received little explicit and focused discussion. It is perhaps
 42 unsurprising, then, that its implications have not been sufficiently appreciated. The
 43 goal of this paper is to explore several underappreciated implications of a kind of
 44 widely accepted thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics.

45 In Sects. 2–2.4, I will unpack the thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics that
 46 ethicists like Kagan, Rawls, and Scanlon concede, and explain why they are correct
 47 in conceding it. In Sects. 3–3.3, I will argue that the thesis of epistemic modesty in
 48 ethics has at least three implications that have not been sufficiently appreciated, if
 49 they’ve been appreciated at all. The first implication tells against a suggestion from
 50 Michael Smith (2004), Frank Jackson (1998), and Derek Parfit (2011) that the
 51 attitudes of suitably idealized agents will converge so long as there isn’t any
 52 disagreement among them. The second and third implications are more significant;
 53 they force us to rethink the commitments of *reductive* theories about the nature of
 54 ethics. In particular, the second implication is that we should also be epistemically
 55 modest about the metaphysical nature of ethics, if a reductive theory of the nature of
 56 ethics is true. This implication turns out to be of surprising benefit to reductivists, as
 57 the third implication is that it provides them with a novel line of response to an
 58 influential objection that I call the Dispensability Objection, which runs through the
 59 work of many high-profile opponents of reductivism, including Jonathan Dancy
 60 (2006), David Enoch (2011), William FitzPatrick (2008), and Derek Parfit (2011).

61 2 The epistemology of ethics

62 One of the central questions of “normative ethics,” “first-order ethics,” or simply
 63 “ethics,” as I will often refer to it, is the question of how to live. Mark Timmons
 64 (2012: 16) writes, for example, that normative ethics “attempts to answer very
 65 general moral questions about what to do and how to be”. Kagan (1998: 2, his
 66 emphasis) says, too, that it “involves substantive proposals about how to act, how to
 67 live, and what kind of person to be”. The most general and hence comprehensive
 68 proposal for answering the question of how to live would take the form of a
 69 substantive theory on which for all x , x is N just in case x is F, where N is a
 70 normative feature such as *morally obligatory* and F is a non-trivial condition such as
 71 *optimific*. The focus of this paper is the epistemology of such comprehensive
 72 theories. To fix ideas, we can start with a strong thesis of epistemic modesty in
 73 ethics—one that we will refine as we go along.

74 *Too Strong* Necessarily, for any subject S and any comprehensive ethical
75 theory P, S does not know P

76 Throughout much of the history of ethics it has been thought that moral knowledge
77 comes from reflection on cases and principles, which suggests that whatever moral
78 knowledge it is possible for S to have of a comprehensive ethical theory might come
79 from such reflection.¹ Call a sequence of reflection that begins with judgments about
80 cases the *method of cases*. A close look at the method of cases will reveal why it is
81 the wrong kind of thing to give us knowledge of a comprehensive ethical theory.
82 This doesn't quite vindicate Too Strong, but as I will explain in Sects. 2.2–2.4, it
83 gets us something close to it.

84 2.1 The method of cases, illustration

85 Let's begin with a simple case from Fred Feldman (1986) where a subject s has
86 three actions available at time t_1 that will lead them to experience various levels of
87 pleasure.

- 88 (a1) work in garden +12
- 89 (a2) go to dump +08
- 90 (a3) start painting house –15

91 Intuitively, s ought to work in the garden at t_1 because doing so will lead them to
92 experience more pleasure than going to the dump and starting to paint the house. A
93 theory that this intuition might lead one to embrace is a version of Act Utilitarianism
94 in the tradition of Bentham, which says that for any action x, agent s, and any time t,
95 s is morally obligated to x at t just in case s's performing x maximizes pleasure at t.
96 This view seems to capture the intuition that s ought to work in the garden at t_1 by
97 predicting that s ought to work in the garden at t_1 , because doing so will lead s to
98 experience more pleasure than the alternative actions available at the time.

99 But to get a handle on exactly how Benthamite Act Utilitarianism works and a
100 feel for its extensional adequacy it seems necessary to test it against more cases.
101 Let's continue to follow Feldman in imagining, then, that s wouldn't enjoy any of
102 the preparation that they would have to do at t_0 to work in the garden at t_1 such as
103 gathering tools from the shed. Imagine, too, that s would enjoy some of the other
104 actions that they could perform at t_0 , such as loading the dump truck. All told, s has
105 the following options available at t_0 .

- 106 (a4) gather tools –01
- 107 (a5) load truck +01
- 108 (a6) mix paint –02

109 Even though s would find gathering tools mildly unpleasant, it intuitively seems like
110 they ought to do so, since s would then be in a position at t_1 to perform the

IFL01 ¹ As McMahan (2016) notes, in the context of a discussion of the role of cases in ethics, "Hypothetical
IFL02 examples, even when used as a means of understanding the most serious of moral issues, have been
IFL03 deployed by philosophers at least since Plato appealed to the ring of Gyges...".



111 thoroughly enjoyable act of gardening. However, on Benthamite Act Utilitarianism,
 112 s has an obligation to load the truck at t_0 , since doing so maximizes pleasure at t_0 .
 113 Moreover, s also has an obligation to garden at t_1 on Benthamite Act Utilitarianism.
 114 But if s loads the truck at t_0 then they can't fulfill their obligation to work in the
 115 garden at t_1 . Intuitively, s can't have an obligation to perform an action at t_0 that
 116 puts s out of a position to fulfill another moral obligation at t_1 , so it seems like the
 117 method of cases reveals that Benthamite Act Utilitarianism is extensionally
 118 inadequate, since it fails to accord with intuitions about this case.

119 At this point, some readers might be thinking that they don't share these
 120 judgments about Feldman's cases and might reasonably be feeling a bit restless
 121 about the discussion as a result. But allow me to urge such readers not to fret. It's
 122 true that my discussion in this section is proceeding on the assumption that my
 123 judgments about cases are probative. However, it is a assumption that not only
 124 makes the exposition easier to follow, but actually makes the job of explaining why
 125 we have excellent reason to accept a thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics even
 126 harder, since diversity among judgments about cases itself provides strong reason to
 127 be epistemically modest in ethics.

128 Taking a second look at Benthamite Act Utilitarianism, it isn't clear that we have
 129 a counterexample to the view that we had in mind. Instead, the second version of
 130 Feldman's case seems to serve as a counterexample to a version of Benthamite Act
 131 Utilitarianism that is *non-sequentialist*, as I'll call it. A sequentialist version of
 132 Benthamite Act Utilitarianism says that for any action x, agent s, and time t, s is
 133 morally obligated to x at time t_n just in case x is part of *sequence* of actions available
 134 to s to initiate at t_n that maximizes more pleasure than any other sequence available
 135 to s to initiate at t_n . A sequentialist version of Benthamite Act Utilitarianism does
 136 not seem to predict that s has an obligation at t_0 that puts s out of a position to fulfill
 137 their obligation at t_1 , because such a version says that s is obligated to perform
 138 whichever *sequence* of actions produces more pleasure than any other available
 139 sequence of actions, which in this case is a4 and a1. So, if anything, it looks like we
 140 have a counterexample to Benthamite Act Non-Sequentialist Utilitarianism but not
 141 Benthamite Act Sequentialist Utilitarianism.

142 To ensure that we have a firm understanding of the view under consideration in
 143 Benthamite Act Sequentialist Utilitarianism, it seems necessary to apply it to more
 144 cases. Consider, then, a case from Michael Zimmerman (2008: 120), who imagines
 145 Brenda inviting her ex-fiancé Alf to her wedding. As Zimmerman describes the
 146 case, the best thing for Alf to do would be to accept the invitation, show up, and
 147 behave, the worst thing would be to show up and misbehave, and the second best
 148 thing would be for Alf to decline and not show up at all. However, Alf is far from
 149 mature, and he would not behave if he were to accept his invitation to the wedding.

150 Intuitively, it seems like Alf ought to decline the invitation to avoid misbehaving.
 151 But because the sequence of actions available to Alf to initiate at t_0 that maximizes
 152 pleasure is the one that involves accepting the invitation, attending the wedding, and
 153 behaving, Benthamite Sequentialist Act Utilitarianism seems to predict that Alf
 154 ought to initiate it. Thus, Benthamite Sequentialist Act Utilitarianism seems
 155 extensionally inadequate, because it yields unintuitive predictions about this case.

156 Again, however, upon closer inspection, it isn't clear that we have a
 157 counterexample to the theory that we had in mind in Benthamite Sequentialist
 158 Act Utilitarianism. For it seems that it is a version of Benthamite Sequentialist Act
 159 Utilitarianism that is *Possibilist* in form that is extensionally inadequate, on which
 160 for any action x , agent s , and time t , agent s is morally obligated to x at t_n just in case
 161 x is part of a sequence of actions available to s at t_n that s can initiate and the amount
 162 of pleasure that *could* result if s did initiate it is greater than the amount of pleasure
 163 that *could* result if s did not initiate it. What this counterexample does not seem to
 164 reveal is that a version of Benthamite Sequentialist Act Utilitarian that is *Actualist* is
 165 extensionally inadequate, on which for any action x , agent s , and time t , s is morally
 166 obligated to x at t_n just in case x is part of a sequence of actions available to s at t_n
 167 that s can initiate and the amount of pleasure that *would* result if s did initiate it is
 168 greater than the amount of pleasure that *would* result if s did not initiate it.²

169 But to ensure that we have a handle on Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist Act
 170 Utilitarianism, it again seems necessary to consult our intuitions about more cases.
 171 To this end we might follow Allan Gibbard (1965) in supposing that you and I have
 172 a pair of buttons in front of us—A and B. If we both push B, then that would
 173 produce more pleasure than any other available sequence of actions. If we both push
 174 A, then that would produce the second most amount of pleasure out of the sequences
 175 of actions available to us. But if I push A and you push B, or vice versa, then that
 176 would produce vastly more pain than other sequences of actions.³

177 Intuitively, it seems like we have an obligation to push B and that we violate this
 178 obligation by doing anything else. But suppose that we both push A. According to
 179 Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist Act Utilitarianism, we do not fail to carry out
 180 any obligations, since at t_0 I am initiating a sequence of actions that would produce
 181 more pleasure than the amount of pleasure that would be produced if I did not
 182 initiate it, and at t_0 you are initiating a sequence of actions that would produce more
 183 pleasure than the amount of pleasure that would be produced if you did not initiate
 184 it. So, it seems that we have a counterexample to Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist
 185 Act Utilitarianism.

186 It isn't likely to come as much of a surprise at this point that things are again not
 187 quite as they appear. On a second pass of the case, we can see that we don't have a
 188 counterexample to a view that is Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist Act Utilitarian
 189 in kind, but rather to a Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist Act Utilitarian view that
 190 is what I will call *Individualist*, in the sense that moral obligation is not a matter of
 191 what we together ought to do, over and above what agents ought to do individually.
 192 So, it looks like we have a counterexample to Benthamite Actualist Sequentialist
 193 Individualist Act Utilitarianism, but not a version of Benthamite Actualist
 194 Sequentialist Act Utilitarianism that I will call *Collectivist*, a view that predicts

2FL01 ² For some defenses of actualism, see Goldman (1976), Sobel (1976), Jackson and Pargetter (1986), and
 2FL02 Goble (1993). For some defenses of possibilism, see Goldman (1976), Greenspan (1978), Humberstone
 2FL03 (1983), Feldman (1986), and Zimmerman (2008). For some defenses of other views on the topic, see
 2FL04 Portmore (2011), Ross (2013), and Timmerman (2015).

3FL01 ³ See also Regan (1980).

195 that while you and I are each fulfilling our individual obligations, we are failing to
 196 fulfill further obligations as a group.⁴

197 I'll spare the reader from engaging in another round of the method of cases in an
 198 assessment of Benthamite Collectivist Actualist Sequentialist Act Utilitarianism. At
 199 this point, we have enough in front of us to begin explaining why we have excellent
 200 reason to believe a modest thesis about epistemic modesty in ethics.

201 2.2 The method of cases, discussion

202 This illustration of the method of cases brings out something important about us:
 203 We do not have an antecedent grasp of all the ethically significant features of the
 204 world that the true ethical theory captures if there is one (I'll assume there is one
 205 from here on for ease of exposition). This was first made apparent in our assessment
 206 of Benthamite Act Utilitarianism, when we saw that it didn't account for the ethical
 207 significance of *sequences* of actions. It was made more apparent in our assessment
 208 of Benthamite Sequential Act Utilitarianism, when we saw that it didn't account for
 209 the ethical significance of the *modal profiles* of such sequences. And it was made
 210 even more apparent in our assessment of Benthamite Actualist Sequential Act
 211 Utilitarianism, when we saw that it didn't account for the ethical significance of
 212 *collective* obligations.⁵

213 But if we do not have an antecedent grasp of all the ethically significant features
 214 of the world that the true ethical theory captures, then it seems that, until we use the
 215 method of cases to reflect on such features, our concepts are such that we do not
 216 *believe* the true ethical theory. Think back to the moment before we made the
 217 Individualist/Collectivist distinction, when we were only employing the Benthamite
 218 Actualist Sequentialist Act Utilitarian idea that moral obligation is analyzable in
 219 terms of the amount of pleasure in the consequences of sequences of actions that
 220 would result from our initiating them. Because we did not yet have a grasp of the
 221 Individualist/Collectivist distinction, it wasn't *until* we used the method of cases to
 222 reveal it that our concept CONSEQUENCE was fine-grained enough for us to incorporate
 223 the Collectivist component in formulating the true ethical theory. But then it seems
 224 that it wasn't *until after* we used the method of cases in this way that we were able
 225 to believe this ethical theory.

226 That we do not have a grasp of all the world's ethically significant features that
 227 the true ethical theory captures is hardly a revelation in light of the fact, however,
 228 that many ethicists still have jobs! Of course, few would likely claim that we

4FL01 ⁴ See Jackson (1987) and especially Dietz (2016).

5FL01 ⁵ Ross (2006) appears to highlight a related phenomenon. "...in general, the more we reflect on questions
 5FL02 of ethical theory, the greater is the number of ethical theories among which our credence is divided. What
 5FL03 initially appears to be a single ethical theory often turns out to be specifiable in a number of ways, each of
 5FL04 which has some plausibility. And when a problem arises for an initial formulation of a theory, it is often
 5FL05 possible to solve this problem by modifying the theory in any of several ways, revealing once more a
 5FL06 multiplicity of theories, each having some degree of plausibility".

229 currently believe the true ethical theory. But that we do not have such a grasp raises
230 the important question of whether we will *eventually* have it.

231 Yet the answer to this question also seems to be negative. Our use of the method
232 of cases over the course of the history of ethical theorizing, a microcosm of which is
233 on display in the previous section, looks like it constitutes excellent inductive
234 evidence for the claim that there will *always* be ethically significant features of
235 which we are unaware.⁶ But if there will always be ethically significant features of
236 the world of which we are unaware, then it seems to be the case that we will never
237 believe the true, fully-specified ethical theory.⁷ And if we will never believe the true
238 ethical theory then it is plausible to think that we will never know it.

239 In other words, the problem with the method of cases is not that it yields
240 unreliable beliefs, unjustified beliefs, or that we cannot use it to satisfy whichever
241 condition it is that distinguishes having a true belief about a comprehensive ethical
242 theory and having knowledge of such a theory. Indeed, Sect. 2.1 looks like a
243 detailed illustration of how our intuitions about cases might license believing one
244 theory in ethics over another.⁸ The *epistemic* problem with the method of cases is
245 ultimately *alethic*: We will never know the *true* ethical theory because we will never
246 *believe* it.⁹

247 Note that this explanation doesn't imply that it is impossible to have knowledge
248 of the ethical significance of *any* feature of the world, and hence it doesn't imply
249 that it is impossible to know anything at all about the true ethical theory. For on the
250 simplifying assumption that my intuitive judgments are probative, the application of
251 the method of cases above clearly illustrates its effectiveness. After all, it seems like
252 it is possible to know that the true ethical theory is not a version of Benthamite Act
253 Utilitarianism that is non-sequentialist, possibilist, or individualist. This is a point
254 that comes from Scanlon, Kagan, and Rawls, as the epigraphs of this paper indicate.
255 It is also a point that is hard to overstate. That we will never know the true, *fully-*
256 *specified* ethical theory is compatible with knowing quite a bit about it.

257 It might be tempting to think that this line of explanation is merely a new spin on
258 a kind of *under determination of ethical theory by evidence*. After all, I have been
259 focusing on the idea that ethical theories purport to tell us how to live, by telling us
260 which actions are morally obligatory for any action. But on an alternative
261 conception of ethical theorizing,¹⁰ ethical theories also purport to *explain why* such

6FL01 ⁶ In a similar spirit, Tanmsjo (2015: xi) writes, "It is not possible to show that a moral principle is true in
6FL02 the abstract. Moral principles always surprise us in concrete applications".

7FL01 ⁷ See Carlson (1995) for a striking illustration of refinements it is possible to make to existing ethical
7FL02 theories, particularly ethical theories in the tradition of consequentialism.

8FL01 ⁸ While intuitions about cases would seem to play a major role in licensing beliefs about comprehensive
8FL02 ethical theories on the method of cases, it seems open to friends of the method of cases to also admit that
8FL03 consistency, generality, internal and external support, and other epistemically relevant features of theories
8FL04 might factor into such licensing. Thanks to anonymous referee for inviting me to speak to this issue.

9FL01 ⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point, and thanks to Caleb Perl for help
9FL02 with doing so.

10FL01 ¹⁰ See Schroeder (2006).

262 actions are morally obligatory. And on such a conception, it might be said that our
 263 intuitive judgments about which actions we morally ought to perform in particular
 264 cases is consistent with many explanations from *different* ethical theories. For
 265 example, the intuitive judgment that s morally ought to work in the garden seems
 266 consistent with the Benthamite Act Utilitarian explanation that they morally ought
 267 to do so because it would maximize pleasure and the Divine Command Theorist
 268 explanation that they ought to do so because God forbids them to do otherwise.

269 But such appearances are misleading. Even if we understand ethical theorizing
 270 under this alternative conception, the illustration of the method of cases in Sect. 2.1
 271 suggests that the full set of possible intuitive judgments *maximally discriminates*
 272 among the full set of possible ethical theories. In other words, the evidence
 273 ultimately supports the one true ethical theory, which means that the idea of
 274 underdetermination of (ethical) theory by evidence does not figure in the
 275 explanation above of why we will never know the true ethical theory.

276 It is also worth noting that the explanation does not rely on any sort of *pessimism*
 277 *about ethical induction* on which we are not in a position to have knowledge of the
 278 ethical features in case_{n+1} on the basis of our knowledge of the ethical features in
 279 case_n. For the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative suggests that
 280 we are in a position to know that case_{n+1} has the very same ethical features as case_n
 281 insofar as case_{n+1} has the same non-normative features as case_n. Yet the
 282 supervenience of the normative on the non-normative is also compatible with
 283 expecting different ethical features in case_{n+1} if the non-normative features of
 284 case_{n+1} are different from the non-normative features of case_n. The problem isn't
 285 that there is no way to guarantee the reliability of induction in ethics, but rather that
 286 cases involving non-normative features that we have yet to reflect upon tend to have
 287 ethical features that outstrip our best available theories.

288 Since the explanation of why we will never know the true ethical theory is not
 289 obviously an explanation that relies upon familiar ideas concerning the underdeter-
 290 mination of theory by evidence, nor familiar ideas concerning pessimism about
 291 induction, it is not an explanation we can obviously resist by appealing to familiar
 292 replies to these issues. Nor, too, does it help to point out that ethical theories often have
 293 *ceteris paribus* clauses built into them, such that many of them are immune to
 294 counterexamples from one-off cases. This is because the true ethical theory specifies
 295 *all* of the ways in which *cetera* fail to be *paria*. Yet the very fact that we include *ceteris*
 296 *paribus* clauses into ethical theories is a tacit acknowledgment that specifying how all
 297 of the ways in which *cetera* can fail to be *paria* is out of our reach, since if it wasn't so
 298 then there wouldn't be any reason not to simply specify all the exceptions.

299 Neither does the explanation above trade on any idiosyncrasies of using the
 300 method of cases to assess theories in the *consequentialist* tradition. We need not
 301 look further than debates in ethics about the nature of principles of reasonable
 302 rejection and whether aggregative principles are consistent with them to see that
 303 *non-consequentialist* theories are also subject to indefinite levels of refinement in
 304 accounting for all of the world's ethically significant features.¹¹ The true ethical

11FL01 ¹¹ See Taurek (1977), Kamm (1998), and Walden (2014) for a sampling of one such line of debate.

305 theory makes correct predictions about *all* possible cases, whether or not such a
306 theory ultimately takes a consequentialist or non-consequentialist shape.

307 In might also be tempting to invoke Rawls (1972) to cast doubt on the
308 explanation. In particular, it might be tempting to invoke the idea that is sometimes
309 attributed to him that we need not heed all of our judgments about cases. Why, one
310 might wonder, for example, couldn't a proponent of Benthamite Non-Sequential
311 Act Utilitarianism stick to their view by dismissing the judgment in the second case
312 from Feldman that the protagonist intuitively could not have an obligation at t_0 (to
313 load the truck) that takes them out of a position to fulfill a different obligation at t_1
314 (to garden)?

315 But sticking to one's guns in this way is to fail to appreciate the excellent
316 inductive evidence from the history of ethical theorizing that there will always be
317 ethically significant features of which we are unaware.¹² Indeed, it seems like an
318 especially egregious failing in light of the explosion of ethical theorizing in the
319 second half of the twentieth century. Take the ethics of war, for example.¹³ Some
320 ethicists¹⁴ have thought that we should divide up the subject matter of the ethics of
321 war into the categories of *jus ad bellum* (resort to war) and *jus in bello* (conduct in
322 war). But others¹⁵ more recently suggest that we should also add the category of *jus*
323 *post bellum* (actions after war), while still others¹⁶ even more recently suggest that
324 we should also add *jus ex bello* (exiting war). In each of these categories, too, there
325 are a dizzying array of subtle issues for which many fine distinctions are currently
326 being made to accommodate them. No less than six principles are traditionally said
327 to be necessary and sufficient for *jus ad bellum*. Yet further scrutiny has yielded
328 even finer distinctions. And the ethics of war is just one among very many
329 examples. At this point in time, W.D. Ross's (2002) idea that there were less than a
330 dozen ethically significant features of the world seems quaint.¹⁷

12FL01 ¹² Moreover, as the second epigraph of this paper indicates, it's not clear that Rawls (1974: 289) doesn't
12FL02 accept epistemic modesty in ethics. He writes, "Taking this process to the limit, one seeks the conception,
12FL03 or plurality of conceptions, that would survive the rational consideration of all feasible conceptions and
12FL04 all rational arguments for them. We cannot, of course, actually do this..." It's true that he goes on to
12FL05 write, "...but we can do what seems like the next best thing, namely, to characterize the structures of the
12FL06 predominant conceptions familiar to us from the philosophical tradition, and to work out the further
12FL07 refinements of these that strike us at most promising." But even if one were to think that
12FL08 Consequentialism, Deontology, Virtue Ethics, and other "predominant conceptions familiar to us from
12FL09 the [Western] philosophical tradition" were exhaustive of the space of conceptions available to us for
12FL10 rational consideration, the illustration of the method of cases in Sect. 2.1 still suggests that there is no
12FL11 limit to possible refinements to these views that would strike as "most promising".

13FL01 ¹³ War is a familiar recent topic of intense interest that seems to expand our sense of the space of possible
13FL02 views in ethics. But new and fascinating topics seem to crop up in ethics regularly, at least on our best
13FL03 days. See Horton (forthcoming) for a discussion of an underappreciated topic that seems likely to
13FL04 powerfully further illustrate this same phenomenon.

14FL01 ¹⁴ See Walzer (1992).

15FL01 ¹⁵ Bass (2004).

16FL01 ¹⁶ See Moellendorf (2008).

17FL01 ¹⁷ MacAskill (2016: 1000) echoes a similar sentiment: "Despite thousands of years of thought, we are
17FL02 little closer to knowing what constitutes a good life than when we started. Indeed, progress in moral
17FL03 philosophy seems to have found more problems than it has solved. This is true, for example, of progress

331 So far I have been explaining why there is excellent inductive evidence for the
 332 claim that we will never use the method of cases to know the true ethical theory. But
 333 I have been understanding the method of cases as a sequence of reflections on cases
 334 and principles that *begins with cases*. This leaves it open that it is possible to know
 335 the true ethical theory by initiating a sequence of reflections on cases and principles
 336 that *begins with principles*. In the next section, I will complete the explanation of
 337 why we should be epistemically modest in ethics by explaining why we shouldn't
 338 expect such sequences of reflections to provide any relief.

339 2.3 The role of principles

340 Instead of reasoning from particular cases to principles and to more judgments about
 341 particular cases and back again, as we do when we use the method of cases, it might
 342 be said that an alternative approach starts with principles. To fix ideas, I will focus
 343 on an exemplar of such an approach, Henry Sidgwick (1907), who attempts to
 344 extract the true ethical theory from “axioms” that he took to be self-evident. In
 345 particular, Sidgwick (380–382) famously claims that Utilitarianism derives, in some
 346 sense, from the following two principles:

347 *Principle of Benevolence*: “...each one is morally bound to regard the good of
 348 any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be
 349 less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by
 350 him”.

351 *Principle of Justice*: “It cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it
 352 would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two
 353 different individuals, and without there being any difference between the
 354 natures or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable
 355 ground for difference of treatment”.

356 For our purposes, Sidgwick seems to be suggesting that it is possible to know the
 357 true ethical theory in virtue of it being possible to know self-evident principles, and
 358 it being possible to derive the true ethical theory from them.

359 One problem with this idea is that it is a matter of tremendous controversy
 360 whether it is possible to derive, in any sense, the true ethical theory from such
 361 principles.¹⁸ But even if we grant that it is possible to do so, it seems as though the
 362 picture of the epistemology of ethical theorizing on display from Sidgwick suffers

17FL04 Footnote 17 continued
 17FL05

17FL06 in population ethics and animal ethics. It may even be that, given the difficulty of the subject matter, we
 17FL07 should never be certain of one particular normative view—our normative evidence and experiences will
 17FL08 always be limited, always open to many reasonable interpretations, and there will always be judgment
 17FL09 calls involved in weighing different epistemic virtues”.

18FL01 ¹⁸ See Schneewind (1977), Nakano-Okuno (2011), Parfit (2011), Phillips (2011), de Lazari-Radek and
 18FL02 Singer (2014), Shaver (2014), Hurka (2014), and Crisp (2015).

363 from the same sort of problem as the method of cases. As we saw above, the
 364 fundamental issue is that there is excellent inductive evidence for the claim that
 365 there will always be ethically significant features of which we are unaware, which
 366 suggests that it is not possible to believe and hence know the true ethical theory.
 367 Similarly, it seems that there is also excellent inductive evidence for the claim that
 368 there will always be axioms or refinements to such axioms for capturing ethically
 369 significant features of the world of which we are unaware.

370 This is no more apparent than in Sidgwick's very own refinement of the
 371 principles of benevolence and justice over the course of *The Method of Ethics*.
 372 Indeed, Sidgwick devotes much of his seven editions of *The Method of Ethics* at
 373 nearly 600 pages a piece to tweaking his formulations of the principles of
 374 Benevolence and Justice, which powerfully suggests that even if it is possible to
 375 derive the true ethical theory from self-evident principles or axioms, that there will
 376 always be self-evident principles or axioms or refinements to them of which we are
 377 unaware. But if so then it is plausible to think that we will also never know the true
 378 ethical theory by initiating a sequence of reflections starting with principles.

379 That neither initiating a sequence of reflections starting with particular cases nor
 380 initiating a sequence of reflections starting with principles does the trick, still leaves
 381 it open that we will know the true ethical theory in virtue of initiating a sequence of
 382 reflections starting with *both* particular cases and principles. But since it is hard to
 383 see why such a sequence wouldn't suffer from the same limitations as the other two,
 384 we are left without any other sequences of reflections that could underwrite the
 385 possibility of knowing the true ethical theory.

386 At this point, it would be instructive to take a step back. In Sects. 2.2 and 2.3, I
 387 explained why we will know the true ethical theory via (1) sequences of reflections
 388 beginning with cases, (2) sequences of reflections beginning with principles, or (3)
 389 sequences of reflections beginning with both cases and principles. It is easy to come
 390 away with the impression that the explanation vindicates the thesis I introduced in
 391 the beginning of Sect. 2.

392 *Too Strong* Necessarily, for any subject S and any comprehensive ethical
 393 theory P, S does not know P

394 But as I'll clarify in the next section, the explanation in Sects. 2.2 and 2.3 vindicates
 395 a weaker and much more plausible thesis about the epistemology of ethical
 396 theorizing.

397 **2.4 Clarifying the idea of epistemic modesty in ethics**

398 As we've seen, our use of standard epistemological approaches to ethical theorizing
 399 constitutes strong inductive evidence for the claim that there will always be
 400 ethically significant features of the world of which we are unaware, which suggests
 401 that we'll never have the conceptual resources to believe and hence know the true
 402 ethical theory. Recall, however, that standard epistemological approaches to ethical

403 theorizing are not epistemologically bankrupt. Indeed, Sect. 2.1 highlights that the
 404 method of cases is an effective tool for cataloguing the world's ethically significant
 405 features. It seems, then, that the reason why it is plausible to think that there will
 406 always be ethically significant features of the world of which we are unaware, and
 407 hence the reason why it is plausible to think that we will never believe and hence
 408 know the true ethical theory, doesn't solely trace to some kind of deficiency with
 409 standard approaches to the epistemology of ethical theorizing. Rather, it seems that
 410 it traces to some feature of *our* use of such approaches.

411 To see this, we might imagine God using the method of cases to become aware of
 412 all the world's ethically significant features. For if we can use the method of cases to
 413 make ourselves aware of some of the world's ethically significant features, then
 414 surely God can use the method of cases to become acquainted with many more such
 415 features. Indeed, it seems as though the nature of God is such that God could use the
 416 method of cases indefinitely. And if so, it seems as though all the world's ethically
 417 significant features would be within God's reach. This suggests that the explanation
 418 from Sect. 2.2 and 2.3 *doesn't* imply that it is *metaphysically impossible* to know
 419 the true ethical theory. Instead of Too Strong, the explanation on offer supports a
 420 more modest thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics.

421 *Modest* Necessarily, for any subject *S like us in a world like ours* and any
 422 comprehensive ethical theory *P*, *S* does not know *P*

423 This thesis says that our limitations as finite creatures are such that we cannot use
 424 standard approaches to the epistemology of ethical theorizing to know the true
 425 ethical theory. It does not, however, rule out that non-finite entities like God could
 426 use such approaches to know the true ethical theory. Yet if God could indefinitely
 427 reflect in such a way as to know the true ethical theory, isn't it natural to think that
 428 we could also know it in virtue of God *telling* it to us?

429 Perhaps. But a number of conditions would have to be met for this to be the case.
 430 In addition to it being the case that God exists, it has to be the case that God's nature
 431 is such that God interacts with the world. Moreover, and perhaps more interestingly,
 432 it has to be the case that God could tell someone the true ethical theory in a way
 433 where the person could *recognize* it as such. But it is plausible to think that the class
 434 of people who could recognize that God is communicating the true ethical theory to
 435 them in a way where they could recognize it is exceptionally limited. Such a person
 436 would plausibly not only have to be a theist, but a theist who believes that God's
 437 nature is such that God interacts with the world. Such a theist would plausibly also
 438 have to understand what ethical theories even look like, and moreover, that she has
 439 some antecedent sympathy on her part for Consequentialism, Deontology, or
 440 whichever theory it is that God is telling them is true. This *isn't* to say that a
 441 scenario in which God communicates the true ethical theory to a Theistic
 442 Interactionist Consequentialist (or Deontologist or whatever) Ethicist in a way
 443 where they believe it is metaphysically impossible. But it is to say that such a
 444 scenario doesn't seem to lend very strong support for the claim that it is possible for
 445 us to know the true ethical theory.

446 Of course, many people believe that a scenario like this in fact took place. After
 447 all, it is often said that God told Moses the true ethical theory upon communicating
 448 the Ten Commandments. Yet in addition to such a scenario depending on all the
 449 same controversial assumptions above, there is another problem with it that is more
 450 in the spirit of the explanation of why we should be epistemically modest in ethics.
 451 It seems like it would take an awful lot of work to come to know the Ten
 452 Commandments as a an ethical theory that tells us which actions are morally
 453 obligatory for *any* action. For example, it's hard to tell which actions the Ten
 454 Commandments prescribes s to perform in Feldman's garden case, and which
 455 actions you and I morally ought to perform in Gibbard's case. To figure this out, it
 456 seems like s, and us, would need to reflect on such cases, and likewise for any case
 457 we have yet to reflect upon. This looks like the same problem all over again.

458 There is another reason to think that the explanation in Sects. 2.2 and 2.3
 459 supports Modest over Too Strong. Imagine an intelligent being from outside our
 460 solar system who has been observing the location of molecules in our solar system
 461 over the last 150 thousand years, such that it knows the correct theory of reference
 462 determination and all the facts about our world, or at least all the facts about our
 463 world that are relevant to determining the referents of 'obligatory', 'wrong', and
 464 other paradigmatic normative words in English. Assuming that the correct theory of
 465 reference determination is naturalistic, such a being would plausibly know whether
 466 any particular action instantiates the property that 'wrong' picks out.¹⁹ But if the
 467 intelligent being is a speaker of our language, and it is appropriate for speakers to
 468 use sentences just in case they know that such sentences are true, and speakers know
 469 that the sentences that they are using are true just in case they know that the entities
 470 picked out by them are instantiated, then it is plausible to think that the intelligent
 471 being knows all the word's ethically significant features. After all, such a creature
 472 would know all the conditions under which uses of 'wrong' are true. Thus, via
 473 semantic descent, such a being would know how to formulate a theory that accounts
 474 for all of the world's ethically significant features.

475 It could be, then, that we will know the true ethical theory in virtue of such a
 476 being telling it to us. But such a scenario seems to lend as little support to the idea
 477 that we will know the true ethical theory as the divine testimony scenario above. Not
 478 only does it depend on the controversial idea of a highly intelligent being knowing
 479 all the facts that are relevant to reference determination, it also depends, perhaps
 480 more interestingly, on the controversial assumption that if an entity knows all the
 481 facts about how words in English are used, then it knows all the ethically significant
 482 features that figure in the true ethical theory.²⁰

483 To be clear, nothing about the explanation of Modest on offer rules out the
 484 metaphysical possibility of knowing the true ethical theory, nor does anything about
 485 it rule out that we will know the true ethical theory in virtue of divine or alien
 486 testimony. All the explanation says is that there is excellent inductive evidence for
 487 the claim that there is a limit on the capacity of creatures like us in a world like ours

19FL01 ¹⁹ See Gibbard (2014) for doubts about such an assumption.

20FL01 ²⁰ See McKeown-Green et al. (2015).

488 to use the epistemological methods for ethical theorizing that are most plausibly
 489 available to us, such as initiating sequences of reflection starting from particular
 490 cases or principles. In the following sections, however, I will show that Modest does
 491 not fail to be interesting because of its modesty.

492 3 Epistemic modesty in ethics, implications

493 That we will never know the true ethical theory has at least three implications,
 494 which I will discuss in (roughly) ascending order of significance. First, it implies
 495 that disagreement is not the only or perhaps even the primary obstacle to the
 496 familiar idea that sufficiently informed and rational agents converge in their
 497 attitudes toward ethics. Second, it implies that we have excellent inductive evidence
 498 to believe that we will never know the true *reductive* theory of the nature of ethics if
 499 there is one (I'll assume there is for ease of exposition from here on). Third, it
 500 implies that it is possible to rebut a recently prominent objection to reductive views
 501 about the nature of ethics that I call the Dispensability Objection.

502 3.1 First implication: lack of disagreement does not guarantee convergence

503 It is a familiar idea in ethics that the normative content of the attitudes of
 504 sufficiently rational agents who are sufficiently informed about the non-normative
 505 facts *converge*. It is also an idea that plays an important role in much ethical
 506 theorizing. For example, Smith (2004: 338) maintains that the failure of such
 507 convergence entails error theory, Jackson (1998: 137) suggests that convergence is
 508 necessary to ensure that we're all talking about a common subject matter when we
 509 use normative words, and Parfit (2011) even implies that his life would be
 510 meaningless without such convergence.

511 Another familiar idea in ethics is that *disagreement* is one of the primary
 512 obstacles to convergence. For example, Smith (2004: 110) writes, "...it may well be
 513 the case that if normative ethics progresses but without making any significant
 514 impact on the deep-seated disagreement that exist in the community on evaluative
 515 matters, then we will, for good reasons, come to lose our conviction that we would
 516 all converge on a single set of desires...". Jackson writes, (1998: 137), "I take it that
 517 it is part of current folk morality that convergence will or would occur. We have
 518 some kind of commitment to the idea that moral disagreements can be resolved by
 519 sufficient critical reflection...Indeed some hold that we know enough as of now
 520 about moral disagreement to know that convergence will (would) not occur".
 521 Indeed, Parfit dedicates the bulk of *On What Matters* to showing that no one really
 522 disagrees with him.

523 It is easy to read these statements and come away with the impression that
 524 convergence would result if there were no disagreement. But this impression might
 525 be mistaken. On the explanation of Modest on offer, we will never know the true
 526 ethical theory because we will never believe it. And we will never believe it because
 527 we lack the capacity to catalogue all of the world's ethically significant features.
 528 Insofar as sufficiently rational agents who are sufficiently informed about the non-

529 normative facts are like us in also lacking such a capacity, it is the case that such
 530 agents will never believe the true ethical theory, too. But then two such agents could
 531 fail to converge on the true ethical theory, in the sense that they could both fail to
 532 believe it, even if there isn't any disagreement between the two of them.

533 3.2 Second implication: epistemic modesty about the nature of ethics

534 It is common to distinguish “normative ethics” or “ethics” as I have been calling it
 535 from “metaethics”. As we've seen, ethics is said to address the question of how to
 536 live. In contrast, metaethics is commonly said to address questions *about* the
 537 question of how to live, like the *linguistic* question of how we manage to talk about
 538 how to live and the *metaphysical* question of the nature of how to live. Indeed, it is
 539 sometimes said that answers to metaethical questions do not carry any commitments
 540 about how to live, and vice versa.

541 Yet some philosophers take issue with this claim. In his discussion of the issue,
 542 Tristram McPherson (2008: 3) remarks that the linguistic claim that ‘right’ means
 543 ‘conducive to happiness’ “transparently has implications for the content of the
 544 correct normative theory”. Mark Schroeder ([forthcoming](#), emphasis mine) makes a
 545 similar point in discussing claims about the nature of ethics. In particular, in
 546 commenting on *reductive* analyses of wrongness, he writes, “once we know *what it*
 547 *is* to be wrong, we will know a condition that is necessary and sufficient for
 548 something to be wrong...we will have attained the holy grail of the most ambitious
 549 and general kind of explanatory normative ethical theory”.

550 McPherson's and Schroeder's idea that the distinction between ethics and
 551 metaethics is not as clean as tradition would have it seems plausible. In particular, it
 552 seems plausible to hold that theses about something's nature entail the conditions
 553 under which generalizations about it are true. Consider the reductive thesis that *what*
 554 *it is* to be pure grain alcohol is to be an ionic compound of carbon, hydrogen, and
 555 oxygen. This thesis looks like it entails the generalization that for all *x*, *x* is pure
 556 grain alcohol just in case *x* is an ionic compound of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen.
 557 Similarly, the Reductive Benthamite Act Utilitarian view that what it is to be
 558 morally obligatory is to maximize pleasure looks like it entails the substantive
 559 normative generalization that for all *x*, *x* is morally obligatory just in case *x*
 560 maximizes pleasure.

561 In light of the points made by McPherson and Schroeder, it is natural to think that
 562 there are other connections between ethics and metaethics. For example, it might be
 563 that if we are or will eventually be in a position to know the true, fully-specified
 564 reductive theory about the nature of ethics, then we are or will eventually be in a
 565 position to know the true, fully-specified ethical theory that follows from it. But as
 566 we've seen, it seems like we will never know the true, fully-specified ethical theory.
 567 If not, however, then it follows that we will never be in a position to know the true,
 568 fully-specified reductive theory about the nature of ethics. Epistemic modesty in
 569 ethics entails epistemic modesty about the nature of ethics.



570 **3.3 Third implication: the indispensability of normative concepts**

571 Reductive Realists (Reductivists, from here on) about the nature of ethics claim that
 572 while normative properties figure in a metaphysical explanation of everything, no
 573 such properties figure in a metaphysical explanation of everything at the most
 574 fundamental level. On such views, normative properties are not among the basic
 575 building blocks of the world; instead, normative properties are fully constituted by,
 576 fully analyzable in terms of, fully grounded in, or “fully reducible to,” as I will say
 577 for ease of exposition, other properties that are among the basic building blocks of
 578 the world.²¹ For example, on the most prominent version of reductive realism—
 579 Reductive Naturalism²²—the basic building blocks of the world are properties that
 580 are discoverable via the empirical sciences, and normative properties are fully
 581 analyzable in terms of these so-called natural properties.

582 There is a prominent high-level objection to reductive naturalism and
 583 reductivism more generally that purports to show that no reductive view even
 584 could be true. Dancy, FitzPatrick, Enoch, and Parfit each suggest that if reductivism
 585 is true, then we do not *need or have reason* to use normative concepts to think about
 586 the world in deciding on how to act in it. Their motivating thought seems to be that
 587 if all there is, so to speak, to the normative property of being morally obligatory is
 588 (say) the natural property of maximizing pleasure, then settling whether a subject
 589 has an obligation to ϕ or decisive reason to ϕ is just a matter of settling whether
 590 ϕ -ing maximizes pleasure.

591 But the idea that we do not need or have reason to use normative concepts strikes
 592 these opponents of reductivism as profoundly mistaken. As Dancy (2006: 142)
 593 writes, “If we do not use normative concepts, we cannot address the question what
 594 is practically relevant and what is not”. Similarly, FitzPatrick (2008: 176, emphasis
 595 mine) claims that “we are not aiming at discovering [any non-normative property in
 596 deliberation], but at discovering...the truth about what is good (or right, or what
 597 there is reason to do, and so on), *as such*”. As Enoch (2011: 108) also puts it:
 598 “When I ask myself what I should do, it seems that just answering ‘Oh, pressing the
 599 blue button will maximize happiness’ is a complete non-starter, it completely fails
 600 to address the question [of whether to push it]”. Parfit (2011: 367), too, claims that
 601 “We should expect that, on [reductivism], we don’t need to make irreducibly
 602 normative claims”.

603 According to these opponents of reductivism, we need or have reason to use
 604 normative concepts in deliberation. But then it follows from this claim and the claim
 605 that if reductivism is true then we do not need or have reason to use normative
 606 concepts that reductivism is false. I call this high-level objection to reductivism *The*

21FL01 ²¹ Compare Jackson (1998) and Shafer-Landau (2003), who understand reductive realism in the
 21FL02 metaphysical ideology of identity, to Chang (2013) and Schroeder (2007), who understand it in the
 21FL03 ideology of metaphysical constitution, ground, and analysis, and who are broadly in line with
 21FL04 contemporary metaphysicians like Bennett (2011) and Schaffer (2009). See also Schroeder (2006) and
 21FL05 Dunaway (Manuscript) for discussions of the relationship between reductivism and realism.

22FL01 ²² For canonical defenses of reductive naturalism see Richard Boyd (1988) and David Brink (1989).

607 *Dispensability Objection*,²³ since the crux of it is the idea that reductivism implies
 608 that normative concepts are *dispensable*, in the sense that creatures like us in a
 609 world like ours can correctly, without suffering any kind of loss or committing any
 610 kind of error, stop using them and replace using them to settle deliberative questions
 611 about how to act with those non-normative concepts that are associated with those
 612 properties that are the most fundamental on reductivism.²⁴

613 Observe, however, that if reductivism implies anything at all about the possibility
 614 of us correctly dispensing with normative concepts, it is plausible to think that
 615 reductivism implies that it is possible for us to correctly dispense with using
 616 normative concepts on the assumption that reductivism implies that we have
 617 *knowledge* of reductivism. After all, if we were to replace our normative concepts
 618 with non-normative concepts that did not pick out the normatively fundamental
 619 properties, then we would end up acting radically immorally!

620 This is where epistemic modesty in ethics comes into play as implying a possible
 621 response to the *Dispensability Objection*.²⁵ We already saw that epistemic modesty
 622 in ethics entails epistemic modesty about the nature of ethics. Since we will never
 623 know the true, fully-specified ethical theory, we will never know the true reductive
 624 theory from which it follows. But if we will never have such knowledge, then we
 625 will never satisfy the knowledge condition on correctly dispensing with normative
 626 concepts suggested above.²⁶ But if we will never satisfy such a condition, then
 627 reductivism doesn't imply that it is possible for us to correctly dispense with using
 628 normative concepts in settling deliberative questions about how to act, contra the
 629 *Dispensability Objection*.

630 At this point, some readers will no doubt think that I haven't taken the
 631 *Dispensability Objection* seriously enough. Indeed, some readers might believe that
 632 it is possible to revive the *Dispensability Objection*. The core premise of such an
 633 argument might be not that reductivism implies that creatures like us in a world like
 634 ours can correctly dispense with using normative concepts, but instead that it
 635 follows from reductivism that, so long as it is metaphysically possible to know it, it
 636 is possible to correctly dispense with using normative concepts *in principle*. The

23FL01 ²³ 'The *Dispensability Objection*' is a wink to 'The *Indispensability Objection*' from Enoch, who argues
 23FL02 that we ought to conclude that there are primitive normative properties since we can't avoid committing
 23FL03 ourselves to the truth of them.

24FL01 ²⁴ Note that proponents of the *Dispensability Objection* do not unpack the sense in which they think
 24FL02 reductivism implies that we can dispense with using normative concepts. Since the true reductive theory
 24FL03 is merely a metaphysical thesis about the nature of normative properties, it is hard to see why proponents
 24FL04 of the *Dispensability Objection* would think that it implies that we *psychologically* can stop using
 24FL05 normative concepts, let alone replace using them with non-normative concepts. It's true that reductive
 24FL06 theories are often packaged with auxiliary hypotheses about the nature of normative language, thought,
 24FL07 and concepts, but strictly speaking, reductive theories do not obviously have anything to say about
 24FL08 normative concepts and the psychological possibility of dispensing with them. It is for this reason that I
 24FL09 am understanding the sense of 'can' at issue in the argument as 'can correctly', which I am also
 24FL10 understanding broadly as 'without suffering any kind of loss or committing any kind of error'.

25FL01 ²⁵ For another, less ecumenical response to the *Dispensability Objection*, see Laskowski (2015).

26FL01 ²⁶ The decision to treat knowledge as the norm on dispensing with normative concepts is incidental.
 26FL02 Reductivism doesn't imply anything at all about *any* of our rational attitudes towards it.



637 thought then might be that since it is not in principle possible to correctly dispense
638 with using normative concepts, reductivism is false.

639 Moreover, recall that earlier in this paper, we saw that the explanation of Modest
640 on offer is compatible with the metaphysical possibility of knowing the true ethical
641 theory. In light of this, it is natural to think that it is also metaphysically possible to
642 have knowledge of reductivism. After all, if God and super intelligent aliens can
643 know the true ethical theory, then it seems plausible to think that they can also have
644 knowledge of the reductive theory from which it follows. At the end of the day,
645 perhaps one might believe that reductivism is in fact vulnerable to the Dispens-
646 ability Objection.

647 Since I think the first version of the Dispensability Objection represents the full
648 force of the objection, I'm inclined to think it is a mistake to believe that it is
649 possible to revive the Dispensability Objection in this way. Since it is hard to even
650 get a grip on the idea of it being possible to correctly dispense with using normative
651 concepts in principle, it is hard to take claims about the alleged implications of
652 reductivism in cases that depend on it seriously. But even if we were to have a grip
653 on such an idea, and even if reductivism were to imply that it is possible to correctly
654 dispense with using normative concepts in principle, it is hard to see why this would
655 be a problem for reductivism, and nothing that proponents of the original
656 Dispensability Objection have said provide us with any indication.²⁷

657 4 Conclusion

658 That we have excellent inductive evidence for the claim that we will never know the
659 true ethical theory if there is one is a modest thesis about epistemic modesty in
660 ethics that many ethicists accept. Yet even though many ethicists accept it, it is a
661 thesis that has not received much if any explicit and focused attention. In the first
662 half of this paper, I explained why it is true and in the second half of this paper, I
663 argued that the thesis doesn't fail to be interesting because of its modesty. In
664 particular, I argued that it implies that suitably idealized agents might not converge
665 in the content of their attitudes toward ethics even if there is no disagreement among
666 them. Then I argued that we also have excellent inductive evidence to believe that
667 we will never know the true reductive theory if there is one. This implication is
668 interesting not just because reductivists can use it to answer a prominent objection

27FL01 ²⁷ It might be said that this is where Parfit's (2011: 368) objections to "hard naturalism," or reductivist
27FL02 views that accept the dispensability of normative concepts, kick in. In discussing Brandt, Parfit makes it
27FL03 clear (375) that his problem with such views is that claims involving normative concepts ultimately come
27FL04 out as "trivial." But Parfit either means that such claims would be trivial for creatures like us in a world
27FL05 like ours or not. If he means the former, it's hard to see why reductivists (hard or otherwise) should worry
27FL06 about what Parfit has to say, since such reductivists can simply claim that because analyses can be non-
27FL07 obvious, claims involving normative concepts aren't guaranteed to be trivial. If he means the latter, it's
27FL08 still hard to see why reductivists should worry. After all, the conditions under which claims involving
27FL09 normative concepts would be trivial for God or highly intelligent aliens are far from clear. Moreover,
27FL10 again, it's even less clear why it would be a problem if such claims were trivial for them, which is
27FL11 precisely what we were hoping to find in this appeal to Parfit's objections to hard naturalism.

669 to their view, as I argued also follows from the thesis of epistemic modesty in ethics,
 670 but because it seems implicit in some discussions of reductivism that reductivists
 671 can be distinguished by whether they accept that it is possible for us to know the
 672 true ethical theory a priori or a posteriori.²⁸ But if the explanation and arguments of
 673 this paper are on the right track, it might be that such discussions are based on the
 674 false presupposition that it is possible for us to know the true ethical theory, at all.

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