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Peer Review

Review of: "Certainty and Disagreement in the Moral Domain: A Moral Dilemmas Perspective"

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Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting manuscript. The paper presents an ambitious and intellectually stimulating attempt to bridge Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology, moral philosophy, the literature on deep disagreement, and empirical findings from moral psychology. It challenges the view that the wrongness of killing innocent persons constitutes a unique basic moral certainty and argues instead that moral cognition is structured by at least two fundamental certainties: (1) the protection of individual rights and (2) the promotion of the greater good. The author further proposes that disagreements in sacrificial dilemmas arise not because people endorse fundamentally different moral frameworks, but because they rank these shared moral commitments differently.

Before turning to my concerns, I would like to emphasize that this manuscript has several notable strengths. It presents an original and thought-provoking integration of epistemology, moral philosophy, and moral psychology, written in a clear and engaging style. The paper offers an innovative use of empirical findings in support of a broader philosophical argument and provides an interesting perspective on deep disagreement and moral certainty. Regardless of my reservations about some of the central claims, I believe the manuscript makes a valuable contribution to the debate.

However, despite its strengths, the manuscript currently does not fully establish several of its central claims. In particular, the transition from empirical moral judgments to Wittgensteinian moral certainties remains insufficiently defended. The paper often moves from observations about patterns of moral judgment to “conclusions” about the structure of moral certainty without providing the necessary conceptual bridge. While the empirical findings are interesting and relevant, they do not yet support the stronger philosophical conclusions drawn from them. The major issues that, in my view, require further attention are discussed below:

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Major Concerns

1.The data show that participants make structured moral judgments. They do not directly show that these judgments are grounded in hinge commitments, nor that such commitments operate in the manner characteristic of Wittgensteinian certainties. Throughout the manuscript, the conclusion that certain moral considerations function as hinge commitments seems to rest on a series of increasingly strong assumptions: that these considerations are regularly employed in moral judgment, that they are widely shared, that they are fundamental, and that their fundamentality is sufficient to establish their status as certainties. Yet each of these transitions requires further argument.

2. The proposal that "the obligation to promote the greater good" functions as a moral certainty is the most original claim in the paper but also its most vulnerable point. The author argues persuasively that people often consider consequences and that they sometimes permit harms when significant benefits are at stake. Yet it remains unclear why this should elevate the principle of promoting the greater good to the same epistemic status as a basic certainty. There appears to be an important asymmetry between the two proposed certainties. The prohibition against killing innocents possesses several features commonly associated with moral certainties, including emotional immediacy, developmental robustness, widespread condemnation of violations, and an apparently pre-theoretical character. By contrast, the notion of promoting the greater good appears considerably more abstract, reflective, and theory-laden. Indeed, conceptions of what counts as the greater good vary substantially across moral traditions, cultures, and philosophical theories. For this reason, the manuscript requires a stronger argument for treating the promotion of the greater good as a hinge commitment rather than merely an important moral consideration. The paper successfully demonstrates that many participants are responsive to consequentialist considerations under certain conditions. What remains to be shown is why such responsiveness should be interpreted as evidence for a Wittgensteinian certainty rather than as evidence for a broadly shared but contestable moral principle.

3. A central thesis of Section 5 is that disagreement arises because people assign different rankings to shared values rather than because they endorse different values. This is an attractive and potentially important proposal. Unfortunately, the empirical evidence does not directly test it. The scenarios reveal patterns of judgment, but they do not directly measure participants' endorsement of particular values, the relative weight they assign to competing values, the structure of their value hierarchies, or the manner in which they negotiate trade-offs between conflicting moral considerations. Consequently, while the data clearly demonstrate disagreement, they do not establish that such disagreement results

specifically from differences in weighting rather than from differences in underlying normative commitments. Alternative interpretations therefore remain plausible. For example, some participants may genuinely endorse deontological constraints, whereas others may genuinely endorse consequentialist principles. The observed differences in judgment could reflect divergent moral frameworks rather than merely different rankings of shared values. The manuscript would benefit from acknowledging this limitation more explicitly and from clarifying why the latter interpretation should be preferred.

4. At several points, the interpretation of the empirical findings appears stronger than the evidence warrants. For example, the reported mean approval rating for the Footbridge scenario is 2.67, while the corresponding mean for the Cave scenario is 3.66. Although this difference may be statistically significant, the latter value remains only modestly above the midpoint of the scale. This pattern does not appear to indicate robust consensus. Rather, it suggests the persistence of substantial disagreement among participants. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the data is not the presence of shared moral certainties, but the extent to which disagreement persists even after the introduction of the auxiliary principles proposed in the manuscript. For this reason, the findings may support the existence of structured and systematic disagreement more strongly than they support the existence of shared moral certainties. The paper would benefit from a more cautious interpretation of what these data actually establish.

5. Section 5 is arguably the strongest philosophical section of the paper. Nevertheless, an unresolved tension remains. The author argues that both sides in a deep moral disagreement share the same fundamental values, that the disagreement concerns the ranking of those values rather than their content, and that, for this reason, no paradox arises for hinge epistemology. While this is an intriguing proposal, the argument requires further development. If differing weightings of shared values systematically generate opposing judgments across a wide range of cases, it becomes unclear in what sense these commitments function as shared certainties rather than as competing normative priorities. The manuscript would therefore benefit from greater conceptual precision concerning what exactly is shared, what remains genuinely disputed, what qualifies as a hinge commitment in this context, and how much disagreement can persist before the notion of shared hinges loses its explanatory force.

6. Much of the manuscript relies on findings from traditional trolley-problem research. However, contemporary moral psychology offers several competing frameworks for interpreting these patterns of judgment. Process-dissociation approaches, CNI and CNIS models, dual-process theories, and

contractualist interpretations all provide alternative explanations of why participants respond differently to sacrificial dilemmas. Although the manuscript acknowledges disagreement within the literature, it does not sufficiently explain why its own interpretation should be preferred over these competing accounts. A more substantial engagement with alternative theoretical frameworks would strengthen the paper considerably and help clarify the distinctive contribution of the proposed hinge-based interpretation.

Methodological Concerns

1. Limited Description of the Sample

The manuscript provides minimal information regarding cultural background, education, religious affiliation, nationality, and recruitment strategy.

This is problematic because the paper draws broad conclusions about moral certainties.

Greater detail regarding sample characteristics is necessary.

2. Lack of Effect Size Reporting

Confidence intervals are discussed, but effect sizes are not adequately reported.

Readers need a clearer sense of the substantive magnitude of the observed effects.

3. Combining Two Different Response Scales

The study combines participants who responded on a 1-6 scale and a 1-5 scale with later conversion. This procedure deserves fuller justification and discussion of possible consequences.

Minor Concerns

1. The distinction between certainty, intuition, and conviction should be clarified.
2. The notion of “greater good” fluctuates between utilitarian and rights-based formulations.
3. The article sometimes moves too quickly between descriptive and normative claims.
4. The discussion of antisocial personality risks oversimplifying the moral psychology literature.
5. The role of consent deserves deeper treatment.
6. Some examples (e.g., smoking restrictions) seem considerably different from classic innocent-threat cases.
7. Discussion of cross-cultural variation remains limited.
8. The relation between rights and welfare could be more carefully specified.
9. The rationale for excluding certain counterexamples merits additional justification.

10. The Loop scenario should be incorporated more centrally rather than relegated largely to a footnote.

Recommendation: Major Revision

The manuscript raises important and novel questions and has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the literature. However, the central thesis currently extends beyond what the empirical evidence can firmly support. The author should strengthen the connection between empirical moral judgments and hinge commitments, provide a more rigorous defense of the greater-good principle as a moral certainty, and engage more fully with alternative interpretations of the findings. I appreciate the opportunity to review this manuscript and hope these comments will be helpful to the author in further developing what I believe is a promising and thought-provoking contribution to an important ongoing debate.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.