

## Should Environmental Ethicists Fear Moral Anti-Realism?

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**Abstract:** Environmental ethicists have been arguing for decades that swift action to protect our natural environment is morally paramount, and that our concern for the environment should go beyond its importance for human welfare. It might be thought that the widespread acceptance of moral anti-realism would undermine the aims of environmental ethicists. One reason is that recent empirical studies purport to show that moral realists are more likely to act on the basis of their ethical convictions than anti-realists. In addition, it is sometimes argued that only moral realists can countenance the claim that nature is intrinsically valuable. Against this, we argue that the acceptance of moral anti-realism is no threat to the environmentalist cause. We argue, further, that the acceptance of moral realism is potentially an obstacle to delivering on a third core environmental ethicist demand: namely, that successful action on climate change and environmental destruction requires us to change some of our commonly-held ethical views and to achieve a workable consensus.

**Keywords:** Moral Realism; Environmental Ethics; Moral Anti-Realism; Moral Psychology; Intrinsic Value; Moral Objectivism

## 1. Introduction.

Environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change pose one of the greatest challenges that humanity has ever faced. Many environmental ethicists have been arguing for decades that (i) swift action to protect our natural environment is morally paramount, and (ii) that our concern for the environment should go beyond its importance for human welfare: we should value the natural environment *for its own sake*. Do those who defend these commitments<sup>1</sup> have good reason to favour a particular meta-ethic? Moral realism might appear best suited to provide the moral resoluteness and firm grounding of beliefs in nature's intrinsic value which environmental ethicists advocate. In contrast, anti-realism is often associated with the dangers of relativism and value anthropocentrism.

We take moral realism to be the conjunction of the following three theses.

- 1) MORAL COGNITIVISM: Moral thoughts are beliefs that have (non-deflationary) truth-apt propositions as their contents; moral sentences express these propositions.
- 2) SUCCESS THEORY: There are moral facts; some of the propositions expressed by moral sentences are true.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) STANCE INDEPENDENCE: The standards that fix the truth of moral propositions are not themselves justified, made correct, or made true in virtue of the beliefs, attitudes, agreements, or conventions of actual or hypothetical appraisers.

A meta-ethic that denies any one (or more) of these theses is a form of anti-realism. Broadly speaking, there are three salient varieties of anti-realism. The error theory accepts (1), but denies (2). For the error theorist, moral thoughts are beliefs, but these beliefs are uniformly false. We concede that the error-theory is probably an unwelcome meta-ethic for

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<sup>1</sup> There is great diversity in the views that fall under the umbrella of environmental ethics. However, we believe that these two propositions are fundamental for most if not all such views.

<sup>2</sup> More carefully, success theory is the view that some *positive* moral propositions are true, where, roughly, a positive (deontic) moral proposition is one that entails the existence of a moral reason for someone to perform or refrain from performing an action.

environmental ethicists.<sup>3</sup> We therefore focus on the other two varieties. Moral constructivists accept (1) and (2), but deny (3). According to constructivists, moral facts are themselves ontologically dependent upon facts about what moral appraisers accept, or what they would accept under certain conditions.<sup>4</sup> Finally, expressivists deny (1). On the most basic form of expressivism, an appraiser's thought is not a belief but a conative attitude of disapproval or disapproval. In uttering a moral sentence, a speaker expresses her attitude of (dis)approval towards some act or state of affairs. Because this attitude is a conative state, we do not properly ascribe truth or falsity to it, at least insofar as 'true' and 'false' are understood in a non-deflationary way. We will provide more detail on these theories as we develop our argument, but we should point out that we largely operate with generic versions of expressivist and constructivist forms of anti-realism.

Should environmental ethicists hope that realism gains widespread acceptance, or else prefer for people to generally be anti-realists?<sup>5</sup> At this point an important qualification is due. Empirical research seems to suggest that 'ordinary' people are not generally consistent in their meta-ethical beliefs (Goodwin & Darley 2008, Wright et al. 2013, Poelzler 2017). Rather, people appear to be realists about *some* moral beliefs and anti-realists about others. Our discussion of the acceptance of realism as (dis)advantageous to the environmental ethicists' cause is therefore fruitful only to the extent that people are (or are not) realists about those beliefs that directly concern the environmental cause. This includes beliefs about aggregate harm, environmental values and virtues, and collective responsibility. In the

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<sup>3</sup> It certainly is unwelcome in its most bald-faced, eliminativist form, which recommends that we abandon moral discourse altogether. Some error-theorists, however, maintain that we can preserve moral discourse by treating morality as a fiction. See, e.g., Joyce (2001).

<sup>4</sup> There is some dispute over whether constructivist views really belong on the anti-realist side in taxonomies of meta-ethics. The version of constructivism we have in mind is of the "thoroughgoing" or "meta-ethical" variety, that invokes no prior substantive moral claims in setting up the construction procedure that fixes the moral facts. For more on the varieties of constructivism, see Street (2010).

<sup>5</sup> This is assuming that environmental ethicists are fundamentally interested in solving environmental problems (see also Andrew Light's [2002: 557ff] discussion on what environmental ethics is for).

following, then, we discuss the question of whether or not environmental ethicists should prefer people to be moral realists *with regard to those beliefs*.

Below, we consider and reject two arguments to the effect that ethicists who agree that, (i) there is a need for swift action against environmental degradation, and (ii) that nature is valuable for its own sake, should want to see that moral realism gains widespread currency.

Furthermore, we will argue that the acceptance of moral realism is potentially an obstacle to delivering on a third core environmental ethicist demand, namely that (iii) successful action on climate change and environmental destruction requires us to change some of our commonly-held ethical views and to achieve politically feasible consensus. We dedicate one section to each of these three points.

In section two, we discuss conceptual and empirical arguments purporting to show that people who accept moral realism are more strongly motivated to act on the basis of their moral judgments than those who do not. If these arguments are cogent, then it would seem that environmentalists have instrumental reason to favour the promulgation of realism over other meta-ethical theories.<sup>6</sup> We show that the conceptual arguments fail and that, further, the empirical evidence is inconclusive.

In section three, we consider a second argument to for the view that environmental ethicists should favour moral realism. Environmental ethicists have long defended the view that nature is intrinsically valuable. It is sometimes suggested that only realist theories of value can countenance the claim that nature has intrinsic value.<sup>7</sup> We consider whether this is really so, and conclude that, even though only moral realists can defend the *objective* value of nature, environmental ethicists can do without it.

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<sup>6</sup> Darren Domsy (2003: 685-687) presses an argument along these lines in connection with the concerns of environmental ethicists.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Regan (1981) and Holmes Rolston III (1994) advance arguments of this kind.

After rebutting these two arguments in favour of moral realism, in section four, we present an argument *against* the desirability of a moral realist meta-ethic from an environmentalist point of view. We argue that, insofar as environmental ethicists demand that we adjust long-held moral views, acceptance of moral realism may well pose an obstacle to their agenda. We make a conceptual point to that effect, and also cite a recent empirical study suggesting that acceptance of realism inhibits individuals from changing their moral beliefs.

We conclude that environmental ethics' core agenda might be better served if anti-realism were to gain widespread acceptance amongst people. Even if anti-realist meta-ethics fail to deliver so-called objective values, expressivists and constructivists can accommodate the values central to environmental and climate ethics, in particular, several subtypes of what has been labelled 'intrinsic' value. Anti-realists may be just as motivated to act on the basis of their moral beliefs and are possibly more open to changing their mind and endorsing new notions of harm and responsibility. But crucially, acceptance of anti-realism in fact holds a greater promise with respect to the achievement of a (new) moral consensus regarding our shared responsibility for collective harm to the environment.

## **2. Realism and moral motivation**

Deliberation in environmental ethics is likely to yield the conclusion that currently existing individuals have a strong moral obligation to make significant sacrifices to their personal levels of wellbeing. This gives rise to a concern about moral motivation: even if individuals acknowledge that they have a moral obligation to scale back their environmental footprint, there is no assurance that they will comply with this obligation. It might be thought that realists are more likely than anti-realists to comply with their own moral convictions. In connection with the concerns of environmental ethicists, Darren Domsky (2004: 685-687)

offers an argument along the following lines:<sup>8</sup> Because realists take their moral judgments to reflect objective, stance-independent moral facts, they acknowledge that the authority of morality has a source in something external to their own preferences. Insofar as they acknowledge this external authority, the argument goes, agents will be more likely to comply with what they acknowledge to be requirements of morality. Anti-realists, by contrast do not take morality to have such an external authority. Indeed, the self-aware anti-realist understands that her moral commitments are shaped by contingent and arbitrary social and biological forces. Unfortunately, reflection on this kind of contingency makes it easier for us to dismiss or ignore the moral obligations that we affirm.

If the above line of reasoning were cogent, it would give environmental ethicists a pragmatic reason to prefer the widespread acceptance of realism to the acceptance of anti-realism. But are there good reasons to believe that anti-realists are less likely to act on their moral convictions?

Before we answer this question, let us clarify. There is, first, the (conceptual) worry that rejection of stance-independence entails a belief in the less-than-categorical nature of our moral obligations. Second, there might be the (practical) worry that *as a matter of fact* those who believe in stance-independence are more motivated to act on their moral convictions than those who do not hold that belief. We will address each worry in turn.

Let us begin by explaining how a sophisticated version of expressivism deals with the conceptual worry. Anti-realist expressivists take moral judgment to be essentially connected with certain conative attitudes. Where deontic moral judgments are concerned, the relevant

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<sup>8</sup> Our way of framing this argument also owes much to Blackburn (1998: 286-294).

conative attitude can be thought of as norm acceptance, or moral subscription to a norm. Very roughly, moral subscription to a norm,  $n$ , consists in an intention and a disposition both to conform one's actions to  $n$ , and to encourage others to conform  $n$ . It also consists in a tendency to take a negative conative attitude (e.g. disapproval, anger, or guilt), towards those who violate  $n$  (cf. Copp 1995: ch.5, and Gibbard 1990: Ch.4). For an expressivist, moral judgments *just are* attitudes of norm acceptance or moral subscription. An appraiser judges that  $\phi$  is wrong just in case she morally subscribes to a set of norms that forbid  $\phi$ . Her utterance of ' $\phi$  is wrong' expresses her attitude of subscription to a set of norms that forbids  $\phi$  (cf. Gibbard 1990: Ch.3).

Here is how Simon Blackburn mitigates the conceptual worry on behalf of expressivism. An expressivist who acknowledges the contingent origins of her attitudes must ask herself whether the appropriate response to this knowledge is to take her obligations less seriously than she otherwise would. As Blackburn points out, however, *this is itself a normative question*. How the reflective expressivist answers the question depends upon whether the norms to which she subscribes prescribe taking her accepted obligations lightly, if they have contingent origins. However, as Blackburn observes, there is nothing that compels individuals to accept such a norm (1998: 286-291).

In other words, the expressivist can insist that the questions concerning stance-independence are themselves asking about first-order moral matters. How an expressivist answers those questions will depend upon the kinds of norms she subscribes to. Importantly, we should expect that many expressivists subscribe to norms that forbid certain kinds of action regardless of the social context in which those actions are performed. For instance, an expressivist can subscribe to a set of norms that forbid acts of striking children regardless of

the social contexts in which those acts are performed, and even where the agent himself belongs to a culture whose members subscribe to a contrary norm (cf. Blackburn 1984: 218; Gibbard 1990: 164ff).

Similar things can be said by certain types of constructivists. Consider, for instance, a form of procedural constructivism according to which an appraiser's judgment that a given act is wrong just is a belief with the propositional content that, were the appraiser's beliefs and values in reflective equilibrium, she would subscribe to norms that forbid that act. For a constructivist of this sort, the truth-conditions for a speaker's utterance of 'striking children is wrong' is determined by whether, were she in reflective equilibrium, she would subscribe to norms that prohibit striking children. If those norms that she would subscribe to make no exceptions for social context, then the constructivist speaks truly when she utters the sentence 'striking a child is morally wrong wherever you happen to be from in the world'. It should be noted that we cannot focus on all, not even the most important versions of constructivism here.<sup>9</sup> We merely aim to show that the rejection of stance-independence need not weaken or relativize our moral obligations.

It may be worth noting here that there is an influential argument that suggests that it is realists, rather than anti-realists, who face a problem with respect to ensuring that agents are motivated to fulfil what they judge to be their obligation.<sup>10</sup> For expressivists, to judge that one has an obligation to perform an act just is to have a certain motivational state that disposes the agent to perform the action (e.g. an attitude of approval towards performing the action). For expressivists then, there is a necessary connection between judging an act to be

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<sup>9</sup> According to Sharon Street, "[t]he most prominent characterizations of constructivism in ethics have important threads in common, but none would command universal assent, even among self-described constructivists." (2010: 364).

<sup>10</sup> The argument sketched here has its origin in Hume's *Treatise* (Sect. 3.1.1)



obligatory for oneself and being *pro tanto* motivated to do it. By contrast, moral realists, especially those who subscribe to naturalism, take the connection between moral belief and moral motivation to be contingent. If this sort of realism is true, then convincing an agent that she is obligated to  $\phi$  does not suffice for ensuring that she has *pro tanto* motivation to  $\phi$ . One would need to ensure that, in addition, she has a desire to  $\phi$  (or perhaps a *de dicto* desire to do that which is obligatory). It seems to us wise not to hang too much on the argument just canvassed here, however. Whether or not acceptance of realism yields greater or lesser motivation to carry out what one judges to be obligatory for oneself seems to be an empirical question, not to be settled by *a priori* analysis. To this matter we now turn.

Even if the acceptance of moral anti-realism does not (conceptually) compel us to take our obligations lightly, the more important question is whether, in fact, we *do* take them more lightly in the event that antirealism is true, and our moral attitudes have contingent origins. This is, as we have just suggested, an *empirical* question. A recent study by Young and Durwin (2013) attempts to make some headway towards an answer.<sup>11</sup>

Young and Durwin's experimenters approached passersby and asked them to make a charitable donation. The subjects were divided into three groups. Subjects in the first group were asked a leading question meant to prime them with realist beliefs: "Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?" A second group of subjects were asked a question meant to prime them with anti-realist beliefs: "Do you agree that our morals and values are shaped by our culture and upbringing, so there are no absolute right answers to any moral questions?" A third group

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<sup>11</sup> To our knowledge, this is the first and only empirical study examining the link between meta-ethical realism and moral motivation, hence our detailed discussion of the study. (There exist a few studies discussing the relationship between moral deliberation in *normative* ethics and real-world behavior, such as Schwitzgebel and Rust (2014), but this question does not concern us here).

served as control, and were not primed with any meta-ethical question. Young and Durwin report that, with one exception, every subject answered affirmatively to the meta-ethical question posed to them.<sup>12</sup> After being primed, the subjects were asked to donate money to a charity for impoverished children.

The study found that subjects primed with the anti-realist question were no less likely to donate money than the control group, which had not been primed. So, the contingency of our moral attitudes does not in general weaken people's motivation to comply with the moral demands that they acknowledge. However, those subjects primed with the realist question were twice as likely to donate money than those in the control and anti-realist groups. If agreement with realism indeed strengthens people's moral resolve<sup>13</sup> then environmental ethicists would seem to have reason to hope that moral realism gains currency amongst ordinary people, rather than anti-realism. While the latter may not make us worse off with respect to moral motivation, it does seem to impose an opportunity cost since it prevents us from reaping the motivational benefits that come with the acceptance of realism.<sup>14</sup>

However, there is significant ambiguity in the formulation of the 'primes' in this study. The authors appear to equate moral anti-realism with moral relativism, and realism with universalism. Really, the subjects in this study were primed with universalist versus relativist beliefs. Naturally, moral anti-realism allows for moral relativism, the view that there are no

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<sup>12</sup> They suggest, plausibly, that this is explained by the fact that "laypeople endorse certain aspects of both realism and antirealism and, more generally, hold somewhat flexible, context-dependent meta-ethical views..." (Young and Durwin 2013: 303).

<sup>13</sup> Thus, although Domskey's claim that anti-realism imposes a motivational cost is confuted by Young and Durwin's study, his additional contention that realism confers a motivational benefit is confirmed (2004: 685f).

<sup>14</sup> Anti-realists might object that it is not entirely obvious that Young and Durwin's findings with respect to charitable donations can be extended to the sorts of obligations agents hold with respect to nature. Most people see charitable donations as supererogatory actions. By contrast, the hope of environmental ethicists is to get agents to accept that actions such as reducing one's carbon footprint are not merely supererogatory, but obligatory: the agent who wastefully emits greenhouse gasses, e.g., does not merely fail to do good; she acts wrongly in causing aggregate harm. Perhaps where strict obligations are concerned, the motivational advantage of realist beliefs would not show up. We are unsure whether this line of response is promising for anti-realism.

universal moral standards,<sup>15</sup> while realism does not. But moral anti-realism does not entail relativism; it is compatible with moral universalism. We can therefore say that the group that was primed with a relativist statement was primed with (a version of) anti-realism. The group that was primed with a non-relativist statement, however, was not clearly primed with regard to a particular meta-ethical stance. In other words, the ‘realist’ priming question used in Young and Durwin’s (2013) study does not rule out various forms of moral anti-realism, including at least a generic type of proceduralist constructivism. Sophisticated anti-realists can (and, if they are decent, probably should) affirm the sort of question that Young and Durwin utilize to prime their subjects with realist-sounding thoughts. But if that is so, then the supposed motivational benefits of affirming such claims may be enjoyed by anti-realists, too.<sup>16</sup>

What the study seems to show, then, is that those who are clearly primed with *a particular variety* of anti-realism donate less than those who are primed with a view that is not clearly anti-realist. But it is also true that those who are clearly primed with that particular version of anti-realism do not donate less than those who have not been primed at all, and who – for all we know – could be realists.<sup>17</sup>

In our view, then, Young and Durwin’s study is inconclusive as to whether a belief in moral realism yields motivational advantages that are unavailable to sophisticated anti-realists. However, nothing we have said rules out the possibility that a commitment to moral realism’s

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<sup>15</sup> Or, to be more precise, according to moral relativism, “[m]oral claims are true only relative to some standard or framework; and [t]his standard or framework is not itself uniquely justified.” (Levy 2002: 16).

<sup>16</sup> Young and Durwin speculate about why realist-sounding claims might enhance agent’s resoluteness. The mechanisms that they consider do not seem obviously at odds with the sort of explanations that an anti-realist might offer.

<sup>17</sup> It is completely left open what the view of those in the control group is. They may not have been primed with any type of belief, but it is at least in principle possible that they are all moral realists who are not willing to give much.

unique features, such as moral objectivism, really does positively impact moral motivation. Perhaps future studies will show this to be so. However, we know of no study making the case for moral realism by linking objectivism (rather than universalism) and moral motivation. The upshot of this discussion seems to be that environmental ethicists should perhaps fear moral relativism, or at least its widespread acceptance, rather than anti-realism.<sup>18</sup>

And finally, even if the acceptance of moral realism itself did enhance agents' compliance with their perceived moral obligations (and we have no evidence yet that it does), this would be a welcomed advantage only if agents' moral judgments are true or otherwise desirable. Where an agent has profoundly misguided moral judgments, strengthening her resoluteness may well make matters worse. Consider, for instance, an agent who is convinced that environmental regulations unjustifiably curtail important economic liberties, and so constitute a serious injustice. Strengthening this agent's resoluteness to comply with, to propagate, and to enforce her perceived moral obligations would arguably make the world worse off, at least with respect to matters regarding the environment. In sum, strengthening the moral motivation of agents can benefit environmental ethics only when a sufficient number of agents accept the sorts of moral judgments that environmental ethicists seek to promote.

### **3. Anti-Realism and Intrinsic Value**

Even so, one might still think that environmental ethicists should favour realism for its substantive advantages with respect to the content of first-order ethics. For instance, it is sometimes argued that, in order to satisfactorily ensure that we will protect natural objects, our ethical outlook must recognize a *direct* obligation to preserve and protect these entities:

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<sup>18</sup> This conclusion seems to be supported by studies showing that *exposure to moral relativism* increases the likelihood of immoral behaviour in human agents (Rai et al. 2013). In other words, the existing evidence hints at an inverse correlation between relativism and motivation.

an ethic that recognizes agents to have direct obligations only to other *agents* is insufficient to justify and motivate the kinds of actions necessary to mitigate environmental degradation and global climate change. But, the argument continues, a direct obligation to protect nature can exist only if the value that natural entities have obtains independently of human valuers.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, it should be noted that not all environmental philosophers are equally worried about the adequacy of *indirect* obligations to nature as the foundation of an environmental ethic. Environmental pragmatists such as Andrew Light point out that there may be practical advantages in embracing an anthropocentric notion of the value of nature (see also Weston 1985 and O'Neill et al. 2008). According to Light's *methodological environmental pragmatism*, it would be easier to motivate political action on environmental problems as long as we can appeal to "human-centred motivations without endorsing crass versions of anthropocentrism", since humans "think about the value of nature in human terms" (2002b: 561). In other words, Light thinks that not only should we be pluralists about the source of nature's value in philosophy, but that it can be advantageous for public policy to embrace some level of environmental anthropocentrism (see also Weston 1985). Our argument in this section is thus directed at those who reject environmental pragmatism, or are otherwise dissatisfied with it.

The idea we are grappling with in this section is often expressed by the claim that an ethic which grounds direct obligations to preserve the environment must assign non-human natural entities (such as plants, ecosystems, and non-human animals) *intrinsic* value.<sup>20</sup> Some

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Andrew Light writes that "Since the inception of environmental ethics in the early 1970s, the principal question that has occupied the time of most philosophers working in the field is how the value of nature could best be described such that nature is directly morally considerable, in and of itself, rather than only indirectly morally considerable, because it is appreciated or needed by humans." (2002a: 426).

<sup>20</sup> Tom Regan (1981:31f) explicitly suggests that the intrinsic value of natural entities is *sufficient* to ground direct obligations to preserve those entities. It is less clear whether he takes their having intrinsic value as

environmental ethicists have argued that to ascribe intrinsic value to such entities is to ascribe to them a value that they possess *independently of how they relate to moral appraisers*.<sup>21</sup> But, the argument goes, only moral realists can accommodate the claim that some things possess value in this way. Because anti-realists (including pragmatists) reject stance-independence, any value ascribed to an object must be grounded in facts about how that object relates to appraisers.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, an anti-realist meta-ethic cannot accommodate a first-order ethic that includes direct obligations to protect nature. Moral anti-realism, thus, would deprive environmental ethicists of powerful argumentative resources.

Is it true that only realists can ground the intrinsic value of non-human natural objects? It is sometimes argued that one's meta-ethical commitments place no constraints on one's first-order moral commitments.<sup>23</sup> If that is right, then the realists' concern that anti-realism cannot accommodate intrinsic value judgments must be mistaken, and there is no cause for concern. As it happens, however, we are doubtful of the thesis that meta-ethical commitments do not constrain the availability of normative positions.<sup>24</sup> So we cannot help ourselves to such a quick dismissal of the realist's challenge.

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*necessary* for our having direct obligations to them. In any case, what is clear is that he takes such obligations *in fact* to be grounded in the intrinsic value of natural entities.

<sup>21</sup> Authors who argue that natural objects possess value independently of moral appraisers include Holmes Rolston III (1994), as well as Paul Taylor (*Respect for Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Robin Attfield (*The Ethics of Environmental Concern*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1991). It should be noted though, that Taylor uses the term 'inherent worth' for this kind of value.

<sup>22</sup> The *locus classicus* for this kind of argument is Moore (1922). Regan (1981) and Rolston (1994) also advance arguments in this spirit.

<sup>23</sup> John O'Neill, for instance, writes that "meta-ethical commitments are logically independent of ethical ones" (1992: 123).

<sup>24</sup> At least one reason for such doubts is that certain forms of contractarian constructivism seem at least *prima facie* unable to accommodate the normative view that agents have direct obligations to protect entities that are incapable of deliberation. For a discussion of the relationship between meta-ethical commitments and normative commitments, see Sumner (1967), Tanner (2013), and Schroeder (2017).

Above, we distinguished three varieties of moral anti-realism: constructivism, expressivism, and the error-theory. We believe that some varieties of constructivism and expressivism can accommodate ascriptions of non-anthropocentric intrinsic value, as we shall argue below.

Showing this is complicated by some ambiguity as to what is meant by ‘intrinsic value’. In the following, we will disambiguate these different meanings and will argue that versions of anti-realist theories can accommodate all but one subtype of ‘intrinsic value’. It is increasingly common to use ‘intrinsic value’ to denote *non-instrumental* value—that is, value that does not depend upon its causing some further object or state of affairs that itself has value.<sup>25</sup> Within this broad conception of intrinsic value as non-instrumental value, several narrower conceptions are possible. According to one salient understanding of intrinsic value, a thing has intrinsic value iff it has value that depends solely upon its intrinsic, non-relational properties.<sup>26</sup> Let us call this *Moore’s conception of intrinsic value*, since it is usually attributed to G.E. Moore. These two conceptions of intrinsic value are not equivalent. In fact, the broader conception countenances value based on extrinsic properties. To illustrate this point, consider an authentic Van Gogh painting and a perfect replica of it, painted by an anonymous art student. There is nothing incoherent about the claim that, whatever the non-instrumental value of the authentic Van Gogh, the replica is less valuable than the original. To account for this difference in value, however, one must identify a difference in the properties possessed by the two paintings. However, *ex hypothesi*, the paintings share all of the same *intrinsic* properties; the only salient difference between the two concerns a

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<sup>25</sup> Many environmental ethicists have criticised our traditional, common-sense ethical outlook for failing to ascribe non-instrumental value to nature. Not only do they consider this ethical outlook to be false, but also they fear that it prevents us from adequately addressing environmental problems. We find this sort of argument implicit in Sylvan (1973), for instance, and explicit in Katz (1987) or Katz and Oeschli (1993). Katz, for instance, argues that the notion of intrinsic value is important but not all-important to environmental ethics. Rather, “it serves to limit the exclusive reliance on anthropocentric instrumental values” (1987: 240).

<sup>26</sup> In “The Conception of Intrinsic Value”, G.E. Moore writes, “To say that a kind of value is ‘intrinsic’ means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, and in what degree it possesses it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question” (1922: 260).

relational, *extrinsic* property: one was painted by Van Gogh, while the other was not. Thus, at least some of the non-instrumental value of the original Van Gogh depends upon its extrinsic properties. The non-instrumental value of the Van Gogh is not equivalent to the value it has solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties.

There is a further way in which ‘intrinsic value’ has been understood—namely, to mean *objective* value: value that is independent of any valuer, or that has its grounds in something other than human beings and their attitudes. Let us call this the *objective conception of intrinsic value*. We have, then, at least three different conceptions of ‘intrinsic’ value: non-instrumental value, Moorean intrinsic value, and objective value. In the following, we discuss for each of these conceptions whether anti-realism can accommodate them and, further, whether they are essential for an environmental ethic.

Let us begin with non-instrumental value. As others have noted, anti-realists can accommodate moral judgments to the effect that states of affairs and objects—for instance, natural environments—have non-instrumental value (cf. O’Neill 1992, O’Neill et al. 2008). To see how expressivism can accommodate this moral judgment, let us begin with the observation that there is a certain conative state of mind that we can justly call *valuing*. It may be that this state of mind is reducible to other conative attitudes, such as desiring, or desiring to desire. But anti-realists can also allow that valuing is a *sui generis* mental state. Next, notice that one can value an object instrumentally or non-instrumentally. For instance, Adam can instrumentally value his collection of rare vinyls for how it helps him attract attention among his fellow students. Alternatively, he can value the collection for its own sake. With this distinction in hand, we can build up to anti-realist accounts of evaluative judgments about what is good and bad. For one kind of expressivist, an appraiser’s judgment



that a thing is non-instrumentally valuable is to be identified simply with her non-instrumentally valuing that thing (cf. Blackburn 1998: 70). Alternatively, an expressivist can say that what it is to judge that a thing is non-instrumentally good is just to subscribe to norms that require non-instrumentally valuing that thing (cf. Gibbard 2003: 7). Because there is nothing conceptually or psychologically implausible about normal human appraisers non-instrumentally valuing natural environments (or subscribing to norms that require non-instrumentally valuing natural environments), expressivists have no trouble accommodating judgments to the effect that natural environments are non-instrumentally valuable.

In a similar way, non-instrumental value judgments can be accommodated by standard forms of moral constructivism. According to one kind of constructivist account of non-instrumental goodness, an appraiser's judgment to the effect that a thing is non-instrumentally good is a belief with the propositional content that she would non-instrumentally value that thing, if she were in an ideal epistemic position (cf. Lewis 1989: 113). On an alternative constructivist account, the relevant propositional content is that, if her beliefs and values were in reflective equilibrium, the appraiser would subscribe to a set of norms that requires non-instrumentally valuing the thing in question. Insofar as it seems conceptually possible that an agent in ideal epistemic conditions would instrumentally value nature, this kind of constructivism is compatible with the belief that nature has non-instrumental value.

Opponents of anti-realism might find this unsatisfying. The anti-realist's way of understanding non-instrumental value judgments might be thought to make the value of nature too contingent of an affair. According to this objection, anti-realists of the sort described above must still concede that, *if we had a different psychology or different attitudes*—that is, if humans failed to non-instrumentally value nature—then nature would

have no non-instrumental value, and we would have no direct obligation to preserve it.<sup>27</sup> This, the objection continues, would be tantamount to denying that we have any direct obligation to preserve the environment at all: we only have such an obligation insofar as we care about (or value, or are disposed to value) the environment.

For expressivists, this sort of worry is easily parried. For them, the claim that the environment would have no value if no one cared about it is just another first-order normative claim. To agree with such a claim is to subscribe to norms that contain the following prescription: non-instrumentally value nature, but do so only on the condition that people in fact non-instrumentally value it. Surely, however, those of us who non-instrumentally value nature do not subscribe to norms that prescribe valuing it only on the condition that people in fact value nature. Instead, we subscribe to norms that prescribe non-instrumentally valuing nature, and that prescribe protecting it unconditionally.<sup>28</sup>

Constructivists can avail themselves of a similar manoeuvre to the one used by the expressivist: provided that the norms that actual appraisers in fact would subscribe to in reflective equilibrium (or when assuming the practical point of view) prescribe unconditional, non-instrumental valuing of nature, we speak falsely when we utter the sentence ‘if no one valued nature, nature would have no non-instrumental value, and there would be nothing wrong with destroying it’.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> G. E. Moore (1922: 269) presses a more general argument along these lines.

<sup>28</sup> Blackburn (1984: 217-220) responds along these lines to the same kind of worry.

<sup>29</sup> This kind of response on behalf of the constructivist is in the same spirit as Robert Elliot’s (1996: 227). It rests on what might be described as a “rigidification maneuver”. The truth conditions for our claims about what would be valuable in other possible worlds—including worlds in which we have very different psychologies—are fixed by facts about how we are disposed to value in the actual world (cf. Lewis 1989: 132f).

Let us now turn to Moore's conception of intrinsic value. To start with, it is far from clear why non-instrumental value is not sufficient to ground direct obligations to protect the environment. It is hard to see what great advantages are lost if one has to concede that these obligations are ultimately grounded in relational properties of natural objects. The interest in enabling ascriptions of intrinsic value to nature was primarily to enable environmental ethicists to argue in favour of direct, non-contingent obligations to preserve the Earth's ecosystems. However, non-instrumental value ascriptions already suffice to ground such direct obligations.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the demand that our duties to protect the environment be grounded solely in the intrinsic properties of natural objects unnecessarily limits the range of considerations that can serve as moral reasons to preserve and protect. For instance, one might wish to point to an ecosystem's being untampered with by humans as moral grounds for protecting it—or at any rate, as grounds for preserving it, rather than, say, destroying it and replacing it with an engineered ecosystem. There is nothing objectionably anthropocentric about a moral judgment of this sort. And yet, the property of being untampered with is surely an extrinsic property of any given ecosystem. Thus, if the sort of value required to ground direct moral obligations is value dependent solely on intrinsic properties, we could not countenance the existence of an obligation to preserve or prefer untampered environments.

In any case, as O'Neill observes, anti-realists can accommodate intrinsic value judgments.

For an expressivist, to judge that an ecosystem is intrinsically valuable in Moore's sense is just to non-instrumentally value the ecosystem because of its intrinsic properties. There is no

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<sup>30</sup> When G. E. Moore introduces the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value in *Principia Ethica*, he explains that the importance of the distinction is that only intrinsic value claims can ground universal moral principles. We note with interest that in *Principia*, he contrasts intrinsic value with "value as a means", or what we are calling instrumental value (1903: 72-75). For more argument to the effect that non-instrumental value is of greater moral importance than intrinsic value, narrowly defined, see Shelly Kagan's "Rethinking Intrinsic Value" (1998). Kagan's essay is noteworthy in that it advocates that the term 'intrinsic value' be expanded so that its denotation includes non-instrumental value that is grounded in an object's extrinsic properties.

reason to suppose that appraisers cannot so value an ecosystem. For the constructivist, an appraiser's judgement that an ecosystem is intrinsically valuable is a belief with the content that, were her beliefs and desires in reflective equilibrium, she would non-instrumentally value that ecosystem because of its intrinsic properties (O'Neill 1992: 125).

So what about the third notion of intrinsic value: *objective* value or value that is independent of appraisers? It might be argued that anti-realists cannot countenance judgments ascribing this kind of intrinsic value to objects. After all, at least for constructivists, whether or not a thing has value will depend upon its relations to appraisers—in particular, it depends on whether appraisers are disposed to value it, or else are disposed to subscribe to norms that require valuing it. The expressivist may meet this objection by explaining that the norm they express subscription to prescribes that agents value nature regardless of whether actual appraisers value it. However, the constructivist might have to concede that this type of intrinsic value is unavailable to her.<sup>31</sup> Exactly how great a disadvantage this is for the constructivist environmentalist is not clear.<sup>32</sup> But, as we shall see in section four, objectivism may well be an obstacle to their cause.

Still, we do not think that this should make environmental ethicists wary of constructivism. On balance, for the environmentalists' plight, the most important conception of intrinsic value seems to be that of non-instrumental value, since it is sufficient to ground direct obligations to protect the environment. Further, as John O'Neill et al. pointed out, “[w]hile

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<sup>31</sup> Some scholars such as Sharon Street (2016) have argued that anti-realist constructivists can also defend moral objectivity claims, however the level of that objectivity is not as robust as it is for realism, and the truth of moral claims ultimately depends on the judgments of the valuer.

<sup>32</sup>In their empirical study on moral objectivism, Geoffrey Goodwin and John Darley (2010: 184) say that they “would predict that if a moral value is thought to be objective, it is more likely to be afforded a sacred or protected status—and thus, an individual will be unwilling to compromise on that value when deciding how to vote.” However, they concede that “no data exist to support this contention, and so it is a task for future research to examine it.” (ibid.)

the rejection of realism does not rule out non-humans having intrinsic value, neither do realist positions rule it in.” (2008: 118).<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Revision, Obstinacy and Consensus

Finally, let us turn to an argument *against* moral realism’s usefulness for the environmental ethicists’ agenda. We argue that the widespread acceptance of realism may well be an obstacle to delivering on what many believe to be an indispensable shift in moral attitudes. The argument is roughly this: If (1) commonly held moral views particularly on harm and responsibility are mistaken and detrimental to the environmentalist cause, and (2) in order to address environmental problems (a large proportion of) moral agents need to change their views accordingly, and (3) if a belief in the truth of moral realism makes people less likely to revise their moral views than beliefs in anti-realism, then (4) – other things being equal – a widespread acceptance of (or belief in the truth of) moral realism would be undesirable for the environmental ethicist.

As to the first two premises of the argument: Environmental ethicists regularly argue that ‘commonsense morality’ is ill-equipped to support stringent obligations towards the

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<sup>33</sup> It may be worth addressing another kind of judgment that anti-realists might be thought to be unable to accommodate, and which environmental ethicists might be loath to give up. Even if anti-realist can accommodate judgments to the effect that nature has non-instrumental (and even intrinsic value), they cannot accommodate the thought that nature has *the property* of being non-instrumentally valuable, or important. Nor can anti-realists accommodate the claim that it is *a fact* that nature is non-instrumentally valuable.

This kind of objection is best seen as directed in particular against expressivists. Constructivists, after all, have never denied that there are moral facts or properties. They claim only that such facts and properties are stance-dependent. But even expressivists accommodate judgments of these sorts by adopting a deflationary or minimalist account of facts and properties. Paul Horwich argues, for instance, that to say that it is a fact that *x* is *F*, or that *x* has the property of being *F*, is to say nothing more than *x* is *F* (Horwich 1993: 73-74; cf. Blackburn 1998: 75-83; Gibbard 2003: 182-183). Expressivists who adopt this strategy soon confront the question of what distinguishes this kind of expressivism from moral realism; after all, like realists, they are now willing to assent to the claim that there are stance-independent moral facts. The most straightforward reply cites the fact that expressivists offer an account of the function of moral discourse that is different from the account advanced by realists—namely, the central function of moral sentences is to express the acceptance of norms (cf. Stoljar 1993). In addition, Gibbard highlights a difference in the order of explanation. Whereas a realist offers an account of moral judgments that begins with moral facts, expressivists offer an account of moral facts that begins with an account of the nature of moral judgment—an account that does not, in the first instance make reference to moral facts.

environment, to acknowledge the moral wrongness of aggregate harms, and to make us value nature in the way we should. Consequently, many of them advocate for ‘*new*’ values and virtues (Jamieson 2010 & 2014, O’Neill et al. 2008). For instance, Dale Jamieson (1992, 2010) thinks that commonsense morality’s presuppositions about harm and responsibility stand in the way of perceiving individual actions as harmful in the context of climate change. He argues that, “Unless we develop new values and conceptions of responsibility, we will have enormous difficulty in motivating people to respond to this problem” (Jamieson 1992: 149f). Authors such as Lichtenberg (2010) and Cripps (2011) argue that we have to move away from a widespread belief in harm as an individualist notion, and towards accepting that individually harmless actions that are harmful in aggregate may violate the harm principle.<sup>34</sup>

Let us now turn to the third premise. We argue here that a belief in moral realism may be an obstacle to revising one’s moral views, based on the results of several empirical studies conducted by Geoffrey Goodwin and John Darley on moral objectivism (2008, 2010, 2012). These studies found evidence that objectivist attitudes are correlated with a greater degree of closed-mindedness. To clarify: Goodwin and Darley focused on the “objective” versus “subjective” nature of moral beliefs, and therefore did not phrase the results of their research as claims about realism versus anti-realism. We will come back to this issue in a moment. Here are some of the results of the studies: They found that, the more a subject treats a given moral judgment as objective, “[a] the less comfortable they were with another person’s disagreeing with that belief, [b] the more immoral they thought this other person was, and [c] the less they thought it was possible they themselves could change their mind with respect to the belief in question” (2012: 254). To be clear, Goodwin and Darley thus far have uncovered only a correlation; they have not established whether objectivist attitudes *cause* obstinacy of

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<sup>34</sup> Parfit (1986) has a similar point concerning collective harm, more generally.

this sort. However, they are fairly clear that “Perceived objectivity negatively predicted participants’ self-rated likelihood of ever giving up the moral belief over which disagreement had arisen” (ibid., p. 253) and they point out that “objectivity predicted both discomfort with a disagreeing other person ... and attributions of immorality to this person” (ibid.). A potential link between realist attitudes and obstinacy should at least temper the degree to which environmental and climate ethicists welcome the spread of a realist moral outlook.

Two caveats are due at this point: First, one might wonder about the particular notion of objectivity used by Goodwin and Darley and whether it really corresponds to a realist outlook. One way in which they attempted to establish the perceived ‘objectivity’ of statements was to ask participants to agree or disagree with statements with ethically pertinent (and other) content, and to then indicate “the extent to which they thought there was a correct answer as to whether each statement was true” on a 6-point scale “with higher numbers indicating greater objectivity” (ibid. p. 251). The second measure of perceived objectivity of a statement was established by telling participants in a second stage that another person had disagreed with them concerning the initial statement, and to ask them about “the extent to which they thought the disagreeing other person was mistaken, as opposed to neither party being mistaken” (ibid.). Goodwin and Darley write that “The two measures of objectivity were well correlated with each other ... and so for each item, we averaged these two measures to form a composite index of objectivity” (ibid.).

Their first measure of objectivity corresponds to what we called ‘moral cognitivism’ and ‘success theory’, two of the key characteristics of moral realism, namely the idea that moral propositions are truth-apt, and the idea that some moral propositions are actually true. While this is a feature of moral realism, it is also a feature of some forms of moral anti-realism, such

as constructivism. In other words, the first measure of objectivity does not uniquely establish a realist position. What about the second measure of objectivity employed by Goodwin and Darley? Participants were asked if two contradicting moral propositions can both be correct. According to the authors, rejecting this claim is an indicator for an objectivist stance. But is it a measure of moral realism? *Strictly speaking*, rejecting this idea does not commit one to moral realism. Constructivists and some types of expressivists may well reject this claim, too. Or, in other words, Goodwin and Darley's second measure of objectivism does not directly match onto the third feature of realism as laid out above, namely stance independence. However, one might think that *some* of those who reject stance-independence would happily agree that two contradicting moral propositions can both be correct: namely, relativists and subjectivists.

Thus, Goodwin and Darley's conclusions concerning the effects of what they call moral 'objectivism' may be thought not to directly transfer to moral 'realism', strictly speaking, since their measure of objectivism does not wholly correspond to a realist stance. However, we propose a more nuanced approach. Given that most 'ordinary' people are not sophisticated or scholarly meta-ethicists, it seems reasonable to think that those who would endorse Goodwin and Darley's objectivist claims are in fact those who (with regard to the issue in question) have realist tendencies. Most 'ordinary' people are not familiar with sophisticated versions of anti-realism and when they disagree that two contradicting moral propositions on some issue can both be correct then it is very plausible to assume that they do so because they endorse stance independence and are thus realists at least with regard to that issue. And, if it so happens that people have a realist bent with regard to environmental virtues and values, then it appears that they would be in fact less inclined to change their



mind in this regard, and would be less comfortable with those who disagree with them.<sup>35</sup> This, to conclude our first argument, should make a realist stance look unattractive to environmentalists.

An additional argument against realism concerns the need to produce a politically feasible consensus on environmental values. Apart from a greater reluctance to change one's mind, another correlation that gives rise to worries is realists' discomfort with diverging views, and greater "attributions of immorality" to those with whom they disagree. We have previously mentioned Andrew Light's pragmatist and pluralist approach to environmental values. He argues that having people on board is crucial to the success of the environmentalist agenda (and that in order to get them on board, it will be wise to not discard anthropocentric values altogether). Indeed, there is a special urgency that the global community reach a workable *consensus* regarding our obligations *vis-à-vis* environmental protection.

We believe that the strength of a moral anti-realist outlook lies in its better enabling such consensus. Before we argue for this, let us briefly turn to a counterargument. A realist might argue as follows: if we accept moral realism is true, then we accept that there is a single true standard of morally right action. Any moral disagreement would indicate that at least one party's beliefs are mistaken, and the recognition of this would spur parties to continue moral deliberation and inquiry until a consensus is reached. By contrast, if we accept some form of anti-realism, then we should not see fundamental moral disagreement as evidence that someone is mistaken in their moral judgments. Because each party to such a disagreement has no grounds for thinking that their own moral judgments are defective, they have no

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<sup>35</sup> "Objectivity scores reliably predicted discomfort with another person" (Goodwin and Darley 2012: 252) and "Perceived objectivity negatively predicted participants' self-rated likelihood of ever giving up the moral belief over which disagreement had arisen" (ibid., p. 253). One of the measures of discomfort seemed to be whether or not participants would have someone who they disagree with as a housemate.

reason—or at any rate, they have *less* reason than they would, given the acceptance of realism—to remain engaged in debate, and to be willing to revise their own moral judgments in light of considerations brought forth by others.<sup>36</sup>

However, we argue that it may well be that the prospects for consensus would be more promising on an anti-realist outlook. Many anti-realists agree that the very point of moral discourse and deliberation is to facilitate social cooperation. On the constructivist side, John Rawls characterizes an essential part of the “social role of morality” as “...achieving the more or less minimum conditions of effective social cooperation, for example, by specifying standards to settle competing claims and setting up rules for coordinating and stabilizing social arrangements” (Rawls 1980: 553). On the expressivist side, Allan Gibbard writes, “[t]he chief biological function of [normative discussion is to coordinate. Normative discussion allows for common enterprises and adjusts the terms of reciprocity...” (Gibbard 1990: 76; cf. Blackburn 1998: 39 and Lenman 2007: 75f). If this is the function of moral discourse, then, insofar as we engage in moral deliberation at all, there will be pressure on us to seek consensus with potential co-operators. Thus, Gibbard continues, “For such a mechanism [as normative discussion] to work, two things are needed: tendencies towards consensus, and normative governance. Normative discussion must tend toward all accepting the same norms, and acceptance of norms must tend to guide action” (ibid.). In defending his constructivist, ideal advisor account of normative reasons, Michael Smith goes further. He maintains that it is *constitutive* of the sort of ideal normative deliberation that determines what the normative facts are that the appraiser aims at consensus with other rational appraisers (Smith 1995/2004: 27).

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<sup>36</sup> Brink (1986: 37) argues along these lines. Robert Elliot (1996: 230) considers this sort of argument, and offers a reply on behalf of moral constructivism.

For the anti-realist, then, the very point of engaging in moral deliberation and inquiry would be undermined if she did not in general seek consensus with those in her community with whom she disagrees morally. For a realist, by contrast, the point of moral inquiry is to discover the stance-independent moral facts, whatever they may be. A failure of convergence should move us to revise our moral judgments, then, only if it indicates that our judgments do not accurately reflect the moral facts. But if we are not in doubt as to the accuracy of our own moral judgments, however, the mere fact of dissent gives us no reason to revise our judgments. Importantly, this point holds for both those realists who are little concerned with the environment *and* those who take to the other extreme and regard humans as planet Earth's 'disease'. If Light is correct, and a pragmatic and – above all – workable consensus is to be found at neither extreme, then constructivist and expressivist approaches to morality may be more promising than realism.<sup>37</sup>

## 5. Conclusion.

To the extent that environmental ethics is concerned with promoting an environmentalist agenda, there may be good reasons not to over-emphasize the objectivity of those values, to fight anti-realist attitudes or else to prefer ordinary people to be moral realists in this regard. Many plausible varieties of moral anti-realism enable us to ascribe non-instrumental value to nature. According to the empirical evidence available, avowals of moral anti-realism do not weaken agents' motivation to comply with their acknowledged obligations. Moreover, the

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<sup>37</sup> Of course, an anti-realist may encounter interlocutors whose attitudes are so incongruent with her own that she concludes that engagement with those others will be pointless. So anti-realism should not be taken to counsel us to resolve all moral disagreements, no matter what our interlocutors' starting commitments may be. But in this respect, the anti-realist's predicament is no different from the realist's. A realist who encounters an interlocutor whose moral judgments are vastly different from her own is likely to conclude that her interlocutor is so confused, blind, or deluded, that no amount of discussion with that person will get them on track. Moreover, the realist might see no prospect that her own mind will be changed by the thoughts of her interlocutor.

sorts of realist avowals that seem to strengthen motivation are licensed by sophisticated anti-realist theories. Finally, the acceptance of moral realism may come with significant disadvantages with respect to achieving a consensus on first-order ethical matters. Empirical research indicates that realist-sounding avowals are associated with a greater resistance to revising one's moral judgments, and a greater aversion towards dissenters. Moreover, since anti-realists take aiming at convergence to be constitutive of moral deliberation, anti-realist theories have at least one indisputable advantage with respect to the prospects of convergence.

Finally one may ask to what extent our argument is specific to the domain of environmentalism. Clearly, questions of moral motivation, the source of moral value and the possibility of ethical consensus are of general importance to lived morality and moral philosophy. However, we believe that in the environmentalism debate these issues converge with a special urgency that is unique to this domain<sup>38</sup>. The question of objective (and therewith non-anthropocentric) value seems especially relevant to how we relate to nature, whereas it might seem less troubling where human wellbeing is directly concerned. Further, with the advent of dangerous climatic change, there is a pressing, urgent need for a workable ethical consensus at the political level, and for morally motivated agents at the individual level. We hope to have shown how environmentalists (which on our understanding includes all environmental ethicists) have good reason to prefer (some forms of) moral anti-realism over realism.

## **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>38</sup> For a brief description of the 'special' status of environmental ethics see (Light 2002a: 426-427).

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