Moral Truth in a Plural World: A Critical Synthetic Realist Account of Value, Finitude, and Human Judgment

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Abstract
Contemporary moral inquiry is marked by a persistent tension between claims to objective moral truth and the realities of human finitude, cultural pluralism, and historical contingency. Robust moral realism promises normativity and critique but is often charged with dogmatism or moral imperialism; anti-realist and constructivist approaches illuminate the interpretive character of valuation but risk dissolving moral authority into preference, convention, or power. This article argues that Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR) provides a more adequate framework for moral truth in plural societies. CSR affirms that values are objective features of reality while insisting that human access to value is mediated, fallible, and historically situated. By integrating ontological realism with epistemic fallibilism, hermeneutic consciousness, and pragmatic testing in lived social life, CSR avoids both absolutism and relativism. The framework explains persistent moral disagreement without surrendering truth, justifies cross-cultural critique without moral imperialism, and accounts for moral learning and progress. The paper concludes by demonstrating CSR's relevance for applied ethics—especially corporate responsibility, environmental stewardship, and public moral discourse—reframing moral inquiry as a truth-seeking practice characterized by conviction without arrogance and humility without nihilism.

Keywords: Critical Synthetic Realism, Moral Truth, Pluralism, Hermeneutics, Fallibilism, Moral Realism, Human Judgment, Social Ethics

1. Introduction: Moral Conflict, Pluralism, and the Need for a Better Framework

Pluralism is no longer a theoretical abstraction. It is the daily condition of modern life: societies contain multiple moral languages, overlapping loyalties, and divergent visions of human flourishing. Moral conflict now unfolds across political polarization, religious diversity, postcolonial memory, global migration, and the accelerating ethical dilemmas of technology and ecological crisis. These conflicts are not merely disputes about policy; they are disagreements about what is valuable, what is owed, what counts as harm, and what dignity requires. They raise a fundamental question for humanities and social science alike: can moral claims be true in a way that commands more than local assent, while still honoring the reality of human finitude and cultural difference?.

In contemporary value theory, this question often collapses into a stalemate. On one side stands robust moral realism, insisting that values are objective features of reality, not inventions of culture or will. Realism preserves the possibility of meaningful moral disagreement, moral progress, and principled critique of injustice. Yet it faces persistent anxieties: metaphysical worries about "queer" entities; epistemic worries about access; and—especially salient for a humanities and social-science journal—political worries that realism licenses dogmatism or functions as a philosophical cover for moral imperialism.[1]

On the other side stands the broad anti-realist constellation—expressivism, constructivism, relativism, and certain forms of particularism—each emphasizing that valuation is historically shaped, culturally embedded, and mediated by language, power, and practice.[2] These approaches explain moral diversity and resist

authoritarian moralizing. But the cost can be severe: if moral judgment is ultimately a projection, a construction, or a local practice with no objective anchor, then moral condemnation of oppression risks becoming merely the expression of a competing preference or identity. Critique loses categorical force.

This paper proposes Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR) as a framework for moving beyond the false choice between dogmatic certainty and relativistic dissolution. CSR is not a first-order ethical theory (like utilitarianism or deontology). It is a meta-ethical architecture: a way of understanding the status of value, the meaning of moral truth, and the conditions of responsible moral judgment under finitude. CSR synthesizes four commitments:

- **Ontological Realism:** Values are real features of the world, not merely artifacts of human projection.[3]
- **Epistemic Fallibilism:** All moral knowledge claims are revisable; moral truth is sought, not possessed.[4]
- **Hermeneutic Mediation:** Moral understanding is historically effected and interpretive; it arises within traditions, languages, and social forms of life.[5]
- **Pragmatic Testing:** Moral claims must be examined in their lived consequences—how they shape institutions, relationships, and the possibility of flourishing.[6]

CSR thus defends moral truth while refusing epistemic arrogance. It legitimates pluralism without surrendering critique. It aims at a posture that contemporary plural societies urgently need: conviction without arrogance; humility without nihilism.

2. Literature Review: Moral Realism, Anti-Realism, and the Pluralist Challenge

2.1. Robust Moral Realism and Its Difficulties

Non-naturalist realism—classically associated with Moore and contemporary defenders of robust realism—treats moral properties as irreducible and objective.[7] Its strength is clear: it secures categorical moral authority. But it encounters Mackie's influential "argument from queerness," which claims that if objective values existed, they would be metaphysically and epistemically strange—unlike anything else in our ontology—and would require an implausible faculty of detection.[8]

Naturalist realisms attempt to locate moral truth within the natural world—human flourishing, functional excellence, or objective reasons grounded in features of human life.[9] These approaches reduce metaphysical cost but risk weakening normativity: critics argue they struggle to explain why moral "ought" binds rather than merely describes. In addition, both non-naturalist and naturalist realisms can appear socially rigid when confronted with deep and persistent moral disagreement across cultures and histories.

2.2. Anti-Realist Accounts: Expressivism, Constructivism, Relativism

Expressivism maintains that moral judgments primarily express attitudes or commitments rather than describe moral facts.[10] This explains moral motivation but struggles with the apparent objectivity and logical structure of moral reasoning (the sense that moral argument aims at truth rather than mere expression).

Constructivism grounds normativity in the constitutive conditions of agency or practical reason rather than mind-independent moral facts.[11] Its appeal is that it secures normativity without metaphysical extravagance. Its weakness is that value risks becoming contingent on what counts as "rational agency" (itself a contested, historically shaped ideal), leaving open whether constructivist normativity can meaningfully criticize forms of life that reject its constitutive standards.

Relativism and particularism emphasize context-dependence, cultural difference, and the moral salience of particular cases.[12] These views illuminate how moral judgment operates in practice, but they also threaten the possibility of cross-cultural critique or moral progress understood as learning about objective moral reality.

2.3. Hermeneutics, Social Knowledge, and the Problem of Moral Authority

Hermeneutic philosophy has strengthened anti-dogmatic sensibilities by insisting that understanding is always historically mediated. Gadamer's account of "historically effected consciousness" implies that we cannot step outside tradition and language to access a neutral moral "view from nowhere."[13] Yet hermeneutics need not entail relativism. Newman's account of doctrinal development suggests how traditions can develop toward deeper truth through time, conflict, and correction.[14] Pragmatist approaches likewise emphasize the communal nature of inquiry and the importance of consequences, while resisting the collapse of truth into mere utility.[15]

The gap in this literature is not a lack of positions but a lack of integration: a framework that can affirm objective moral truth while building fallibilism and hermeneutic mediation into its very core—so that realism becomes anti-dogmatic by design, and pluralism becomes a condition of moral learning rather than a refutation of truth.

3. Methodology: Philosophical Synthesis for Humanities and Social Sciences

This article uses a methodology of systematic philosophical synthesis appropriate for interdisciplinary humanities and social science scholarship. The method does not seek to "prove" moral realism by a single deductive argument. Instead, it constructs and validates a meta-ethical framework by (1) diagnosing the weaknesses of dominant positions, (2) integrating their strongest insights through immanent critique, and (3) testing the resulting framework against enduring problems of moral life in plural societies.

First, the paper diagnoses the axiological stalemate as a symptom of philosophical one-sidedness. Realism often under-theorizes mediation and disagreement; anti-realism often under-theorizes authority and critique. Second, it builds CSR through immanent

critique and integration: Popperian fallibilism supplies a disciplined model of corrigible inquiry; hermeneutics supplies a theory of historically situated understanding; pragmatism supplies attention to lived consequences; and realism supplies the ontological ground for truth and critique.[16] Third, the framework's adequacy is assessed by its explanatory power regarding moral disagreement, cross-cultural critique, moral progress, and applied ethical reasoning in institutional contexts.

4. THE CORE CLAIMS OF CRITICAL SYNTHETIC REALISM

4.1. ONTOLOGICAL REALISM: A VALUE-SUFFUSED REALITY

CSR's foundational claim is ontological: values are not merely psychological projections or social conventions. They are real aspects of the world—emergent, relational, and normatively significant.[17] This does not require spooky moral particles. It requires acknowledging that certain patterns of life—needless cruelty, betrayal of trust, dignified care—are not morally neutral. They have objective moral valence grounded in the realities of sentience, vulnerability, agency, and relationship.

CSR borrows a key realist insight from philosophy of science: the possibility of error presupposes an independent reality that resists our expectations.[18] Likewise, moral regret, moral learning, and substantive moral disagreement make best sense if there is something we can get wrong—an objective moral landscape that our judgments seek to track.

4.2. Epistemic Fallibilism: Moral Knowledge Without Infallibility

CSR pairs ontological confidence with epistemic modesty. All moral judgments are fallible. There is no final moral vocabulary and no God's-eye standpoint. Fallibilism is not a weakness but a requirement of responsible moral inquiry in plural societies. CSR adopts Popper's core epistemic posture—conjecture and refutation—while recognizing that moral inquiry is tested not only by logic and evidence, but also by historical experience, dialogue, and institutional outcomes.[19]

4.3. Hermeneutic Mediation: Understanding as Historically Effected

CSR incorporates hermeneutic realism: moral understanding is always interpretive and historically situated. We inherit moral languages—honor, rights, sin, autonomy, solidarity—that shape what we can see as morally salient.[20] These horizons are not mere distortions; they are the conditions of understanding. Yet CSR insists that mediation does not cancel reference: interpretive horizons are ways of approaching reality, not of manufacturing it.[21]

4.4. Pragmatic Testing: Consequences as Evidence, Not Definition

CSR treats consequences as morally and epistemically significant. If a moral framework systematically produces dehumanizing institutions, predictable cruelty, or ecological devastation, that pattern is evidence against it.[22] This is not crude utilitarianism. It is the claim that moral truth cannot remain indifferent to lived reality. Moral claims are not merely propositions; they are guides to life.

Their credibility is tested in the web of social existence.

5. Moral Truth Under Finitude: Human Judgment in a Plural World

5.1. Disagreement as an Epistemic Resource, Not a Refutation of Truth

Pluralism is often deployed as an argument against moral realism: if there were objective moral truths, why would societies disagree so persistently? CSR answers: disagreement is evidence of finitude and mediation, not evidence of the absence of truth. In the sciences, disagreement does not imply there is no physical reality; it implies complex phenomena and limited access. CSR applies the same logic to moral life.

Disagreement has a second function: it is a corrective resource. Encounter with difference can function as a falsifying moment. When we confront rival moral frameworks, we are forced to test whether our judgments reflect moral truth or merely inherited prejudice.

5.2. Cross-Cultural Critique Without Moral Imperialism

CSR justifies cross-cultural critique while refusing moral imperialism. It distinguishes (a) the claim that moral truths exist, from (b) the claim that any one culture possesses them fully. Moral imperialism arises when realism is joined to epistemic arrogance—when a society mistakes its historically situated judgments for final truth.

CSR instead proposes a discipline of critique:

- **Contextual Understanding:** Moral criticism requires interpretive work and attention to meaning.[23]
- **Immanent Critique:** Criticism is strongest when it exposes internal contradictions within a tradition's own acknowledged values.[24]
- **Dialogical Accountability:** Moral claims must be answerable to those affected, especially the vulnerable.
- **Fallibilist Restraint:** Critique must be open to correction; the critic must be critique-able.

This posture makes it possible to condemn slavery, torture, and genocidal violence as wrong in an objective sense while refusing the colonial habit of dismissing entire cultures as morally inferior.

5.3. Moral Progress: Learning in History

CSR explains moral progress as a real—though uneven—possibility. Progress is not the mere substitution of one preference for another. It is the gradual correction of moral blindness through struggle, dialogue, and institutional learning. The expansion of rights, the delegitimation of torture, and the rise of environmental consciousness can be understood as historically mediated approximations toward objective moral reality—often achieved through conflict that exposes hypocrisy and suffering that demands moral recognition.

5.4. Human Finitude and the Virtues of Responsible Moral Judgment

If moral truth is objective yet our access to it is historically mediated and corrigible, then the primary ethical question shifts from "Who possesses moral truth?" to "What practices and virtues make finite agents more reliable seekers of moral truth?" CSR thus invites a virtue-centered account of moral epistemology. The virtues at stake are not merely private character traits; they are intellectual and civic dispositions that enable moral communities to engage disagreement without collapsing into domination or cynicism.

Intellectual humility becomes a defining virtue of moral realism under finitude. Humility does not deny moral truth; it denies the pretension that one's current grasp of truth is final, complete, or immune to correction. Humility is therefore the opposite of relativism. It is a disciplined willingness to submit one's moral claims to criticism, to learn from adverse experience, and to revise judgments when they fail to withstand reasons, evidence, or the testimony of those harmed.

CSR also requires **intellectual courage**. In plural societies, the threat to moral truth is not only dogmatism but also social pressure, reputational fear, and the strategic silencing of unpopular claims. Courage enables agents and communities to name injustice even when doing so is costly. Yet CSR's courage is not performative certainty; it is courage constrained by fallibilism—strong enough to judge, humble enough to be judged.

Third, CSR emphasizes **interpretive charity and hermeneutic patience**. Because moral disagreement frequently arises from divergent historical horizons, moral inquiry requires the work of understanding practices in their meanings and contexts before condemning them. This does not entail moral neutrality; rather, it guards critique from being premature, ignorant, or imperial. Hermeneutic patience is often the difference between critique that illuminates and critique that merely humiliates.

Finally, CSR highlights **communal responsibility**. Moral inquiry is not a solitary performance of conscience but a social practice shaped by institutions, education, media ecology, and political incentives. Communities can cultivate habits that approximate moral truth more reliably—public reasoning, procedural fairness, protections for dissent, and epistemic inclusion—or they can systematically reward propaganda, moral scapegoating, and ignorance. CSR thus locates moral agency at the intersection of personal virtue and institutional design, implying that moral progress is as much a question of social structure as of private sincerity.

6. Social Epistemology of Value: Institutions, Power, and the Conditions of Moral Knowing

Moral inquiry is not only individual. It is social. Institutions shape what can be seen, said, rewarded, and punished. CSR therefore requires a social epistemology of value: how communities distort or enable truth-seeking about the good.

Here CSR converges with traditions that analyze injustice as a distortion of knowledge and recognition. When certain groups are systematically excluded from moral discourse or treated as less credible, moral communities lose access to morally relevant experience.[25] Moral truth-seeking therefore requires institutional habits that protect dissent, amplify marginalized testimony, and create spaces where critique can be voiced without retaliation.

This social dimension is essential for humanities and social sciences: moral truth is not simply "out there"; it becomes accessible through practices—education, public reasoning, deliberation, and the cultivation of virtues (humility, courage, integrity) that sustain moral inquiry over time.

7. Applied Illustrations: CSR in Corporate Ethics, Environmental Value, and Public Moral Discourse
7.1. Corporate Responsibility Beyond Instrumentalism

Corporate ethics is a revealing test case because it displays the tension between objective moral obligation and strategic rationalization. CSR rejects the view that ethical conduct is valuable only when it maximizes profit or brand reputation. Instead, corporations are morally accountable social agents operating within a value-laden reality that includes obligations of dignity, fairness, and harm avoidance.

CSR's fallibilism and hermeneutics matter here: what counts as a "living wage," meaningful consent, or stakeholder harm requires context-sensitive inquiry and dialogue with affected communities. CSR thus avoids both moral minimalism and rigid moralism: it grounds strong critique while requiring practical intelligence and humility.

7.2. Environmental Value Beyond Anthropocentrism and Sentimentality

Environmental ethics often oscillates between anthropocentric valuation (nature matters because it serves humans) and assertions of intrinsic worth that critics dismiss as projection. CSR offers a third path: it treats ecological integrity, biodiversity, and the flourishing of living systems as plausible candidates for objective value—real goods that command moral regard independent of human preference.[26] Yet CSR's hermeneutic and fallibilist pillars caution against premature certainty: we are still learning to name and understand ecological goods, and our moral concepts must be corrected by science, experience, and the testimony of affected communities.

7.3. Public Moral Discourse in Polarized Societies

Finally, CSR is relevant to public moral discourse. Polarized societies suffer from two pathologies: moral absolutism (certainty without humility) and cynical relativism (humility without truth). CSR rejects both. It supports a public ethic of truth-seeking: moral claims are made with seriousness, supported by reasons, exposed to critique, and revised when they fail to withstand the moral evidence of suffering, injustice, or incoherence.

8. Objections to Critical Synthetic Realism and Replies

No meta-ethical framework that claims to secure moral truth while honoring human finitude can avoid serious objection. This section addresses four of the most significant challenges to Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR), demonstrating that these objections, rather than undermining the framework, in fact clarify its necessity and scope.

8.1. The Queerness Objection Revisited

J. L. Mackie's influential "argument from queerness" holds that if objective moral values existed, they would be metaphysically and epistemically strange—entities unlike anything else in the natural world, requiring a mysterious faculty of apprehension. This objection continues to animate skepticism toward moral realism.

CSR responds in two stages. First, it challenges the presupposition that only value properties are "queer." Many features of reality we take seriously—consciousness, intentionality, meaning, normativity itself—are emergent, irreducible, and not directly observable in the manner of physical particles. Yet we do not conclude that consciousness is unreal simply because it does not fit a reductive ontology. Value properties, as CSR conceives them, are emergent features of complex relational realities involving sentience, agency, vulnerability, and social meaning. They are no more metaphysically exotic than other higher-order properties accepted across the humanities and social sciences.

Second, CSR dissolves the epistemic dimension of the queerness objection by rejecting the demand for infallible intuition. Moral knowledge does not depend on a special faculty granting direct access to value. Instead, it emerges through fallible, socially mediated practices: emotionally informed perception, reflective judgment, historical learning, and dialogical critique. The objection loses force once the demand for certainty is abandoned. Values are known as other complex realities are known—imperfectly, corrigibly, and over time.

8.2. Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

Evolutionary debunking arguments, most prominently advanced by Sharon Street, contend that because human moral cognition has been shaped by evolutionary pressures unrelated to moral truth, our moral judgments lack epistemic reliability. If our values track fitness rather than truth, realism appears undermined.

CSR acknowledges the evolutionary shaping of moral psychology but rejects the inference to anti-realism. The crucial mistake lies in conflating influence with invalidity. Evolution also shapes our perceptual and cognitive faculties, yet this does not entail that scientific knowledge is illusory. Instead, it requires methods of correction. CSR interprets evolution as a source of both insight and distortion. Some evolved moral responses (e.g., aversion to suffering) plausibly track real value; others (e.g., parochial favoritism) distort it.

Fallibilism is therefore not an embarrassment but the appropriate response. CSR holds that evolutionary origins explain why moral inquiry is difficult, not why it is impossible. Through critical reflection, cross-cultural encounter, institutional learning, and moral experimentation, human agents can correct for evolutionary bias in much the same way that science corrects for perceptual illusion.

8.3. The Argument from Persistent Moral Disagreement

A common objection holds that deep and persistent moral disagreement—especially across cultures—counts as evidence against objective moral truth. If values were real, why would humanity fail to converge?

CSR rejects the assumption that convergence is the criterion of truth. In domains such as medicine, law, and history, persistent disagreement coexists with objective reality. Disagreement often reflects complexity, limited evidence, power asymmetries, or differing background assumptions rather than the absence of truth. Moral reality, like social reality, is particularly resistant to convergence because it implicates interests, identities, and institutional power.

Moreover, CSR treats disagreement as epistemically productive. It reveals blind spots, exposes distortions, and forces traditions to distinguish between core moral insights and contingent cultural formulations. Persistent disagreement thus becomes evidence of finitude, not relativism. Moral truth remains the horizon toward which inquiry aims, not a possession guaranteed by consensus.

8.4. Is CSR Relativism in Disguise?

A final objection holds that CSR's emphasis on fallibilism, pluralism, and hermeneutics collapses into a sophisticated relativism. If all moral judgments are historically mediated and corrigible, what prevents "anything goes"?

CSR's answer is ontological. Relativism denies that moral claims answer to anything beyond cultural endorsement. CSR explicitly affirms that they do. Fallibilism limits confidence, not reference. Hermeneutics explains how we approach value, not whether value exists. CSR thus distinguishes between epistemic humility and ontological surrender. One can acknowledge the limits of human knowing without denying the reality being known.

9. Moral Emotions as Fallible Access to Value

A further strength of CSR lies in its account of moral emotions as cognitively significant responses to value. Emotions such as compassion, indignation, guilt, and moral shame are not mere subjective feelings; they function as perception-like modes of access to morally salient features of the world.

When one witnesses cruelty or injustice, moral appraisal is often immediate and affectively charged. This phenomenology suggests that value is not inferred after neutral observation but is often experienced as given. CSR takes this seriously while resisting sentimentalism. Moral emotions are fallible: they are shaped by upbringing, ideology, trauma, and social norms. Yet their fallibility does not disqualify them as sources of knowledge any more than

optical illusions disqualify vision.

CSR thus situates moral emotions within its broader epistemology. Emotions provide initial access to value; critical reflection, dialogue, and social correction test and refine these responses. This integration bridges moral phenomenology with realism, grounding ethical judgment in lived human experience without collapsing into subjectivism.

10. Moral Authority, Institutions, and Epistemic Capture
Human moral inquiry does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by institutions—legal systems, corporations, religious bodies, media ecosystems—that structure whose voices are heard and which harms are rendered visible. CSR therefore incorporates a social epistemology of value attentive to power and institutional distortion.

Where institutions reward conformity, suppress dissent, or marginalize vulnerable groups, moral inquiry is predictably distorted. Certain injustices become normalized; others become unspeakable. CSR interprets such failures not as proof that moral truth is socially constructed, but as evidence that access to moral truth is socially constrained.

This insight yields a normative implication: institutions have epistemic duties. They must cultivate conditions conducive to truth-seeking, including protections for whistleblowers, inclusive deliberation, and mechanisms for institutional self-correction. Moral realism without institutional humility risks authoritarianism; pluralism without institutional accountability risks moral blindness. CSR insists on both.

11. Comparative Positioning: Why CSR Is Not Redundant
To clarify its distinctiveness, CSR can be briefly contrasted with prominent alternatives:

- **Robust Non-Naturalist Realism** secures objectivity but risks metaphysical isolation and epistemic rigidity.
- **Constructivism** secures normativity but risks making value contingent on rational agency.
- **Expressivism** explains motivation but struggles with truth-apt discourse.
- **Relativism** explains diversity but undermines critique.

CSR preserves what is strongest in each while correcting their limitations. It is realist without dogmatism, pluralist without relativism, and normative without authoritarianism. This synthetic advantage explains its broad applicability across ethics, social theory, and applied domains.

12. Limits and Open Questions
CSR does not claim finality. Several open questions remain. First, the precise metaphysics of value emergence requires further elaboration, especially in dialogue with moral psychology and social ontology. Second, empirical research on moral learning and institutional correction could enrich CSR's epistemology. Third, cross-cultural case studies are needed to test CSR's protocol for critique in concrete settings.

These limits are not weaknesses but invitations. A fallibilist realism expects incompleteness. What matters is whether a framework can guide inquiry responsibly under conditions of uncertainty. CSR claims to do precisely that.

13. Conclusion: Moral Truth as a Social Practice
Critical Synthetic Realism reframes moral truth not as a static possession but as a social practice of inquiry under finitude. It affirms that values are objective features of reality while insisting that moral judgment must be exercised with humility, courage, and openness to correction.

In plural societies marked by polarization and distrust, CSR offers a viable moral posture: to judge without domination, to doubt without despair, and to treat disagreement not as an enemy of truth but as one of its primary instruments. Moral truth, on this account, is neither an authoritarian decree nor a mere preference. It is the horizon toward which finite human agents orient themselves through dialogue, struggle, and shared attention to the realities of suffering, dignity, and flourishing [1-19].

Notes
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16. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Peirce, "Fixation of Belief"; Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*.
17. For an account of realism compatible with stratified domains, see Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975).
18. Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science*.
19. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*.
20. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.
21. Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*.
22. Peirce, "Fixation of Belief."
23. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.
24. Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine*.
25. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
26. For a philosophically influential bridge between value discourse and practical reason, see Putnam, *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*.

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