

MORAL REASONS FOR MORAL BELIEFS: A PUZZLE FOR MORAL TESTIMONY PESSIMISM

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ABSTRACT: According to moral testimony pessimists, the testimony of moral experts does not provide non-experts with normative reasons for belief. Moral testimony optimists hold that it does. We first aim to show that moral testimony optimism is, to the extent such things may be shown, the more natural view about moral testimony. Speaking roughly, the supposed discontinuity between the norms of moral beliefs and the norms of non-moral beliefs, on careful reflection, lacks the intuitive advantage that it is sometimes supposed to have. Our second aim is to highlight the difference in the nature of the pragmatic reasons for belief that support moral testimony optimism and moral testimony pessimism, setting out more clearly the nature and magnitude of the challenge for the pessimist.

KEYWORDS: evidentialism, moral epistemology, moral testimony,
reasons for belief

Introduction

Testimony is commonly thought to provide normative reasons for belief, at least in favourable circumstances. A standard favourable circumstance is one in which an individual has sufficient reason to believe that some other agent is reliably better positioned than she is to have or arrive at true beliefs about a particular domain of inquiry.¹ Call such a person an *expert* about the relevant domain. The domain in question may be empirical, such as quantum physics or plumbing. The domain may also be theoretical, such as mathematics or logic. In each case, expert testimony in support of particular claims in those domains provides normative reasons for non-experts to believe those claims.² Perhaps it would be epistemically better in some way for a non-expert to study up on plumbing or number theory, in order that she may arrive at all the important truths in the vicinity through her own powers of reasoning. Still, due to the cognitive limitations of humans, in

¹ And assume that this agent is also more likely to be right than I am for each individual belief on which we disagree.

² We shall set aside the question of whether, and how, other experts ought to react to expert testimony.

general, it is not the case that non-experts ought to study up on each particular domain of inquiry. In many cases non-experts not only have a normative reason to defer to expert testimony, but also ought all-things-considered to do so. Some cognitive division of labour is both desirable and inevitable.

Given this, it is perhaps surprising that various philosophers³ have argued that there is something wrong with forming at least one class of beliefs – the class of moral beliefs – on the basis of expert testimony. Some of these same philosophers are prepared to grant that there are truths about the moral domain, and also that there are identifiable moral experts. The strongest anti-deference positions are versions of what we will call *moral testimony pessimism*, according to which expert moral testimony does not provide us with normative reasons for belief. There can be weaker versions, which both admit that expert moral testimony is reason-providing and insist that deference to moral testimony is nevertheless something against which there is a standing *pro tanto* reason. Roger Crisp, in particular, sometimes seems to be arguing for the weaker position, although he may ultimately support moral testimony pessimism as characterized above.⁴ We are agnostic about the weaker claim for the purposes of this paper. Our argumentative focus is moral testimony pessimism understood as the stronger claim.

The combination of the views that there are moral truths, that there are identifiable moral experts, and that expert moral testimony is not reason-providing, is what most interests us in this paper. This is because we think that this combination of views is difficult to sustain, and also because the difficulties here connect with important issues in the broader literature on normative reasons for belief. In the broader literature, there is a widespread assumption that *strict normative evidentialism*, or some closely related view, must be true. Strict normative evidentialism (‘evidentialism’ for the rest of the paper) is the view that

³ This includes such recent figures as Alison Hills (“Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology,” *Ethics* 120, 1 (2009): 94-127), Robert J. Howell (“Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference,” *Nous* 48, 3 (2014): 389-415), Robert Hopkins (“What is Wrong With Moral Testimony,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74, 3 (2007): 611-634), Sarah McGrath (“The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, 1 (2009): 321-344), and Philip Nickel (“Moral Testimony and its Authority,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4, 3 (2001): 253-66).

⁴ Roger Crisp, “Moral Testimony Pessimism: A Defense,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* LXXXVIII (2014): 129-43.

all normative reasons for belief are or are constituted by evidence for the contents of the beliefs for which they are reasons.⁵

While we are convinced that the strict version of evidentialism has been shown to be untenable on a variety of fronts, we feel it is important to observe that one's commitments with respect to evidentialism have ramifications for one's view about whether there can be reasons for having or forming moral beliefs based on expert testimony.⁶ There are a variety of ways in which evidentialism might be used to defend moral testimony optimism, the view that moral expert testimony does provide normative reasons for moral beliefs, so that its rejection might be seen as an important step on the road to a defence of moral testimony pessimism.

Even with our anti-evidentialist sympathies, we will argue that moral testimony pessimists have the tougher row to hoe. We shall argue that standard arguments for pessimism commit their proponents to a particularly controversial kind of pragmatism about reasons for belief. This commitment, we argue, is self-undermining. A liberal form of pragmatism about reasons for belief may provide *pro tanto* reasons against deferring to moral expert testimony, but in many cases it will provide stronger positive reasons for deferring. As noted above, some authors who identify themselves as pessimists are committed only to the weak thesis that there are some standing normative reasons for not deferring to moral expert testimony, but allow that these reasons may be outweighed in many or even most cases by the reasons for deferring to moral expert testimony. We call this version

⁵ Closely related views allow some flexibility for logical truths and certain kinds of reasons that count *a priori* towards the truth of a belief, when evidence does not seem to be quite the right kind of way to describe the truth-indicating relation. We shall not distinguish between these closely related views and strict normative evidentialism proper in this paper, although the differences may be important in other contexts.

⁶ For cases made directly against strict normative evidentialism, see: Miriam McCormick, *Believing against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Andrew Reisner, "Evidentialism and the Numbers Game," *Theoria* 73, 4 (2007): 304-316, Andrew Reisner, "The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons For Belief and the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 145, 2 (2009), 257-272, Andrew Reisner, "Leaps of Knowledge," in *The Aim of Belief*, ed. Timothy Chan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 167-183, Andrew Reisner, "A Short Refutation of Normative Evidentialism," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 58, 5 (2015): 477-485, doi: 10.1080/0020174X.2014.932303, Asbjorn Steglich-Petersen, "Does Doxastic Transparency Support Evidentialism?" *Dialectica* 62, 4 (2006): 541-547, Asbjorn Steglich-Petersen, "Transparency, Doxastic Norms, and the Aim of Belief," *Teorema* 32, 3 (2013): 59-74, and Sarah Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," *Ethics* 116, 3 (2006): 498-524.

of pessimism ‘*pro tanto*-ism.’ It is our contention that while *pro tanto*-ism may be plausible, it is in a certain sense uninteresting.

Although evidentialism only supports optimism, both optimism and pessimism may be supported by non-evidential moral reasons for belief. In light of this, we shall emphasise that there is a distinction between two types of moral reasons for belief – those that by their nature are consistent with the alethically generated reasons and those that are not – that may also be found more generally amongst pragmatic reasons for belief. Indeed, it is our claim that pessimists are, perhaps unwittingly, committed to the existence of pragmatic (specifically moral) reasons for belief that are contrary to the evidence. We have no objection to the existence of these reasons, but we feel that this point has been underappreciated by pessimists, who do not typically present their position as involving such a strong commitment about the nature of reasons for belief themselves. This last point makes moral testimony an interesting test case for thinking about pragmatic reasons for belief more generally.

Our aims in this paper are twofold. We first aim to show that testimony optimism is, to the extent such things may be shown, the more natural view about moral testimony. Speaking roughly, the supposed discontinuity between the norms of moral beliefs and the norms of non-moral beliefs, on careful reflection, lacks the intuitive advantage that it is sometimes supposed to have. The second aim is to highlight the difference in the nature of the pragmatic reasons for belief that support testimony optimism and testimony pessimism, setting out more clearly the nature and magnitude of the challenge for testimony pessimists.

1. Gillian’s Island

We begin by presenting a case that brings out the puzzling nature of the moral testimony pessimist’s claim.

Gillian has set sail for what she intends to be a three hour tour. Along the way she encounters unexpectedly rough weather, and is soon blown off course. Her ship runs aground on an uncharted desert island.

After disembarkation, Gillian learns that the inhabitants are at war both with each other and with all who visit the island. Encountering one of the inhabitants, she believes that her life is now in danger. She hears more inhabitants coming. She calculates that she can run away with little risk to her life, irrespective of the inhabitant’s intentions, but only if she shoots the inhabitant with the ship’s harpoon gun. It is also possible that this inhabitant means her no harm. How does she decide what to do?

Gillian is by nature a morally concerned person, and she wants to do not just what is best for herself, but what is morally right. However, she has no idea what that is. Nothing in her past experience, which has for several years involved little more than being the first mate on Hawaiian pleasure cruises, has given her the tools to make this decision. She lacks the time for adequate reflection on her present situation. She also foresees that she will, until she escapes the island, be faced again and again with new and difficult moral choices, on which she will not have time to reflect in a reasonable and truth-conducive way.

Fortunately, Gillian is not entirely unprepared for such a scenario. She recalls having learned in a university philosophy course that moral experts are people of whom the following is true:

[*Moral Expert*] Someone is a moral expert if the probability that each of her moral beliefs is true is significantly higher than the probability of a non-expert's beliefs being true.

Gillian knows that she is a moral non-expert. Fortunately, prior to departure, she brought three special e-readers aboard the ship. Two of the e-readers have a list of the moral beliefs of a particular moral expert,⁷ and one has a list of the moral beliefs of a non-expert. All of the e-readers can scan Gillian's overall belief state in real time and can then flash the contents of the appropriate moral belief from the e-reader onto a HUD on her eyeglasses.⁸ Gillian knows that because the expert's beliefs will be fed to her in a state of great agitation and susceptibility, she will most of the time give significant weight to the expert's beliefs in the formation of her own moral beliefs.

Gillian can only bring one e-reader with her as she explores the island, and thus will have only one with her before disembarkation. It seems wrong to her not to choose one of the first two, but as she weighs the matter, a complication arises. She notices a small brochure attached to the third e-reader. The brochure explains that the beliefs contained therein are those that are entailed by Gillian's most foundational moral views, and moreover are those that she would in fact arrive at given more time to deliberate.

The matter becomes further complicated, as the brochure goes on to explain that the final e-reader is not in fact an e-reader at all. It is just a fancy container for a pill. If consumed, the pill will accelerate Gillian's moral reasoning, when faced with a crisis situation, to a speed at which she can, and will, form the moral

⁷ That is to say that each e-reader contains a list of one moral expert's beliefs, and that there is a different expert's beliefs on each of the two e-readers.

⁸ Alternatively, one could treat the e-readers as having access to the same evidential field as Gillian.

beliefs that she otherwise would have arrived at much more slowly under ideal deliberative circumstances. Gillian must now decide what to do. She can take no e-reader with her, she can choose one of the two expert e-readers, or she can choose to take the third e-reader cum pill case.

2. E-Readers and Pills

In thinking about what Gillian ought to do, it will be helpful to begin with three observations. First, from the point of view of gaining true moral beliefs, Gillian ought to prefer the expert e-readers to the reasoning pill. Between the two expert e-readers, Gillian has no reason to prefer one to the other. This latter point brings out an interesting feature of expert testimony in general. It is in an important sense impersonal. As moral experts are defined in the Gillian's Island example, their testimony about any individual claim is more likely to indicate the truth than any non-expert's. In its non-philosophical usage, the phrase 'moral expert' is often used to denote various kinds of individuals who think carefully about moral questions and are in a position of moral authority, for example priests and hospital bioethicists. Whether, or to which sort of moral expert – in the popular sense of the expression – an individual actually defers is likely to depend on important details both about the individual's circumstances and the expert's. It is an open question whether the categories of people treated as moral experts in the popular domain are moral experts in the sense that is discussed in the philosophical literature. The moral experts of philosophy are not gurus or wise folk, they are just people who are more likely to have true moral beliefs than non-experts and to testify to those beliefs sincerely.

A second and more important observation is that if moral testimony pessimists are right, one ought to have differing views about which e-reader Gillian ought to take, when there is a choice between expert and non-expert e-readers on the one hand and expert e-readers and a moral reasoning accelerator pill on the other hand. Moral testimony pessimists would reject using any e-reader, expert or not, rather than relying on one's own moral reasoning. However, when there is a pill that can rapidly accelerate one's reasoning, with the result that one will form the identical beliefs that one would have formed taking a non-expert e-reader, they would presumably regard it as permissible to take the reasoning accelerator pill, as it involves no deference.

This brings us to the third observation, one that concerns an extension of the original case. We can stipulate that Gillian's individual moral beliefs will each be less likely to be true if she does not take the pill than they would be if she took it. We can assume that this is because her reasoning is rushed and incomplete

when she reasons under pressure with only her normal cognitive resources. Presumably pessimists would want to say in this case that Gillian ought to take the reasoning accelerator pill, as it improves her moral reasoning without necessitating her deferring to the beliefs of others.

Taking the pill is an action, and thus the reason that supports taking the pill is an instance of a reason for doing rather than for believing. We can imagine yet another alternate scenario in which Gillian has a choice between a reasoning accelerator pill and a susceptibility to expert suggestion pill. The latter will cause Gillian to believe all expert testimony without any intermediate reasoning. Without it, Gillian will only rely on her own moral reasoning. Choosing between the two pills is also an action, and the direct reasons that govern it are reasons for action.

The availability of the two different pills puts Gillian in an interesting position. She has the ability to cause herself to have a significantly alethically improved set of moral beliefs, by taking the susceptibility to suggestion pill. She has the ability to cause herself to have a somewhat alethically improved set of moral beliefs by taking the reasoning accelerator pill. Assuming for the sake of argument that having true moral beliefs (or moral beliefs that are more likely to be true) will cause Gillian to act in a morally preferable way over having fewer true (or likely to be true) moral beliefs, there is a straightforward moral reason to take the susceptibility to suggestion pill. This moral reason is, again, a reason for action.

If, as we shall argue later,⁹ the pessimist must claim that there are non-alethic moral reasons for belief, there is an apparent non-alignment between the moral reasons for belief themselves and the moral reasons for action, even where the actions in question are those that will partially determine which beliefs one has and how one forms them.

An alternative picture would be one on which the moral reasons for action – for choosing which pill to take – are wholly parasitic on the reasons for having or acquiring the relevant moral beliefs. For now, we will be assuming that the parasitic hypothesis is correct. When we speak of Gillian's choosing to take a particular e-reader, or pill, we are assuming that the reasons are derivative from her reasons to have or acquire certain moral beliefs. In section 5, we shall discuss why adopting the non-alignment hypothesis rather than the parasitic hypothesis is problematic for the pessimist.

⁹ See sections 4 & 5.

3. Gillian among the Pessimists

From one perspective it seems obvious what Gillian ought to do. According to the case as described, each of the first two e-readers is programmed to produce the moral judgments of some particular moral expert. Although our moral experts need not be infallible and may disagree amongst themselves, a weak condition on being a moral expert is that one is more likely than non-experts to arrive at true moral beliefs, after having engaged in careful moral deliberation. As Gillian is a non-expert, should she choose to take the pill rather than to defer to either of the expert e-readers, she would thereby be deliberately choosing a course of action that increases the likelihood that she will have false moral beliefs.

For the sake of the example, let us assume that acting on true moral beliefs is more likely to result in performing the morally right action than acting on false moral beliefs. Let us also assume for the sake of the example that the aggregate result of acting on true moral beliefs is such that there are no grounds for objecting morally to adopting the policy of acting on individually true moral beliefs more of the time rather than less of the time. If we take these assumptions on board, and we assume that Gillian is enkratic, it is difficult at first blush to see how we could reasonably endorse Gillian's doing anything other than taking one of the expert e-readers.

If there are *pro tanto* reasons for Gillian to take an expert e-reader with her and to acquire the beliefs to which it testifies, it is so in part because the testimony of moral experts is good evidence for the truth of the claims for which it is testimony. Taking an expert e-reader, and forming beliefs on the basis of what it says is the case, is the most successful way for Gillian to conform to the epistemic norm of believing in accordance with the evidence.

However, possessing true moral beliefs is surely not desirable for epistemic reasons alone. Because of the special connection between true moral belief and morally right action, we seem to have special (that is to say, moral) reasons to be concerned with getting the facts about morality correct. Since we should certainly aim at doing what is morally right and avoiding doing what is morally wrong, we should also aim to have true moral beliefs. Given that there thus seem to be powerful moral, as well as epistemic, reasons to choose an expert e-reader, it is puzzling how anyone could recommend that Gillian choose otherwise. Yet various philosophers in the recent literature have defended pessimism and made arguments that seem to commit them to giving such an answer in Gillian's case.

There are several strategies that moral testimony pessimists have taken. In assuming both moral cognitivism and the existence of identifiable moral experts, our case already takes some of these off the table. Sarah McGrath has argued that

it is much easier to account for what is suspect about moral deference on a non-cognitivist picture, according to which there are strictly speaking no moral truths to be an expert about (or to defer to the expert about).¹⁰ Michael Cholbi has argued that there are no identifiable moral experts, so the issue of whether to defer to their testimony does not really arise.¹¹ We will here concern ourselves with arguments against moral deference from those who grant these assumptions. There are two broad strategies left to the opponent of moral deference. The first points to epistemic reasons against deferring to the testimony of moral experts, the second to moral reasons. For either of these general pessimist strategies to gain any traction, it must first be granted that some normative reasons for belief are pragmatic. If there is any interesting problem of moral deference, that is, it is because pragmatism about reasons for belief has some plausibility.

4. Does What Gillian Knows, But Does Not Understand, Hurt Her?

Alison Hills claims that we must distinguish between moral *knowledge* and moral *understanding*.¹² The former can be acquired purely by means of deference to a moral expert's testimony, the latter cannot. Moral understanding purports to be a more demanding notion than moral knowledge, and calls for "a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true."¹³ Hills thinks that the non-expert who arrives at true moral beliefs on account of her deferring to expert testimony does not have this. Because, she claims, understanding is more epistemically valuable than mere knowledge, such an agent is epistemically deficient, even though she is in possession of the same moral knowledge as the expert. As such, there is at least some epistemic reason against deference to moral experts.

There may be something to be said for the view that a grasp of the reasons why some belief is true confers some additional epistemic value on the holding of that belief.¹⁴ Insofar as the e-readers in the case above only provide the moral

¹⁰ McGrath, "The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference." It is worth noting, moreover, that if moral sentences do not express beliefs but rather non-cognitive attitudes, the pessimist also need not endorse pragmatism about reasons for belief.

¹¹ Michael Cholbi, "Moral Expertise and the Credentials Problem," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10, 4 (2007): 323-334.

¹² Hills, "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology."

¹³ Hills, "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology," 101.

¹⁴ Although whether there is anything to such a *grasp* of the relevant reasons beyond knowledge that they are the reasons is itself debatable. For an argument that to possess 'moral understanding' is just to have some additional moral knowledge see Amber Riaz, "Moral Understanding and Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 172, 1 (2015): 113-128. An interesting

expert's judgments, without the reasons that ground them, perhaps something important will be missing from the deferential agent's final epistemic position.

However, so far this is only to say that true moral beliefs arrived at by deference are not as epistemically valuable as true moral beliefs arrived at in a way that grants understanding. It may well be epistemically preferable to have moral understanding and not just moral knowledge. Not even the optimist about moral testimony need deny this. Indeed, one might say the same about quantum physics or plumbing. There seems to be something epistemically admirable about retaining a grasp of both the relevant facts (about morality, or physics, or plumbing) and of what explains them.

Suppose it is granted that the epistemic value of understanding is greater than that of mere knowledge. In order to justify the claim that it is ever all-things-considered better not to defer to moral experts, when they are available and identifiable, one would need a more general ranking of the comparative epistemic value of different states (true belief without knowledge, mere knowledge, understanding, false belief, etc.). For the pessimist's case to be successful, she must show that small gains in moral understanding, in combination with more significant losses in true moral beliefs, dominate more significant gains in moral knowledge in combination with equally significant gains in true moral beliefs.

In the case of Gillian, if she does not opt to defer to an expert by taking one of the e-readers, she is knowingly making it less likely that the moral beliefs she will arrive at will be true: by not taking the expert e-reader, Gillian will presumably fail to acquire many of the beliefs that evidence requires her to have. Insofar as the requirements of evidence are or provide normative reasons, Gillian will not have many of the moral beliefs that she has strong reason to have.

Philosophers who wish to defend the view that moral understanding is more epistemically valuable than mere moral knowledge may be committed to one of two claims, or to both. The first claim is that when both are attainable, there is more epistemic reason to seek after understanding than after mere knowledge. The second claim is that it is more epistemically valuable (without any explicit commitment to there being special reasons) to have understanding than mere knowledge.

It is difficult to see how either of those claims, or a combination of them, can be leveraged into an argument for an interesting version of pessimism. Moral understanding, which requires that one grasps the reasons why a belief is true,

general discussion of these issues appears in Daniel Star's *Knowing Better: Virtue, Deliberation, and Normative Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

may be in the relevant sense a higher epistemic good than mere moral knowledge. But, a prerequisite for moral understanding is that one have true moral beliefs.¹⁵

This makes Hills style pessimism epistemically odd. One cannot have moral understanding without true moral beliefs, or perhaps mere moral knowledge.¹⁶ Yet, one is required not to form moral beliefs in accordance with the best indicators of moral truth. In fact, one is required knowingly to adopt moral belief formation procedures that are less likely to yield true beliefs than those that incorporate moral testimony. In effect, Hills is suggesting a set of epistemic norms that at once values understanding while undermining a necessary condition – the having of true beliefs – for possessing it.

The Hills style case against moral deference becomes even harder to make when one adds in the moral reasons that appear to weigh in favour of deferring to the testimony of moral experts. Here is what looks like a plausible moral principle: It is morally wrong to knowingly make oneself more likely to commit moral wrongs.¹⁷ Suppose, like Gillian, you are a moral non-expert. You know that you are more likely to do wrong than an expert would be. Although you do not know exactly when or how you will make mistakes, you do know that, if you follow your own lights, you are very likely to go wrong eventually in some cases in which the moral expert would not err. This is just what it is to be a non-expert. Although you cannot in advance identify the particular wrong actions, you can be confident that in opting never to defer you are thereby increasing the probability that you will perform certain morally wrong acts. If you neglect to defer to the testimony of moral experts, you thereby seem to be proceeding in a way that is itself morally wrong.

We need not deny that acting rightly on the basis of moral understanding confers greater moral value on an action than it would have, were it performed

¹⁵ This point is underscored by Daniel Star's explanation of how there can be both moral experts and non-experts that have moral knowledge. According to Star, the difference is that moral experts know the genuine explanations of moral truths, whereas non-experts with moral knowledge are sensitive to moral evidence, even if they are not always aware of the explanations. See his *Knowing Better*.

¹⁶ Just understood as being moral knowledge absent understanding.

¹⁷ Both Aristotle and Hastings Rashdall are committed to a claim of this sort, although they do not put it probabilistically. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1111b. See also Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 76, Hastings Rashdall, *Is Conscience an Emotion?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 33, and Hastings Rashdall, *Ethics* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1913), 69-70. David Enoch has recently made use of much the same principle, this time in explicitly probabilistic terms, also while defending moral deference against its critics. See his "A Defense of Moral Deference," *The Journal of Philosophy* CXI, 5 (2014): 241-3.

without moral understanding. We can even concede that such considerations may provide us with *pro tanto* reasons against deferring to moral experts. However, it is excessively high-minded to suggest that foreseeably setting oneself up to perform wrong actions on a more frequent basis than necessary, in order that one might from time to time perform right actions on the basis of moral understanding, is itself morally commendable. It is a deeply unsettling feature of Hills's view that it seems to treat doing the right thing as being, in the scheme of things, rather less important than one's reasons for having done it. As it is typically others who are harmed by one's wrongdoing, this amounts to a morally problematic fetishisation of how an agent comes to acquire their moral knowledge (or justified true moral beliefs), at the cost of foreseeable harm to individuals other than the agent herself.

5. A Morally Worthy Argument?

Others in the literature argue, more promisingly, that there are distinctive moral reasons not to defer to moral experts.¹⁸ On this kind of view,

the norm that excludes adopting moral testimony is itself rooted in moral considerations i.e. considerations of the kind that ground first-order moral claims.¹⁹

If this were the case, we would be left with moral reasons on both sides, and the issue would become one of weighing these against each other. We shall proceed to discuss just what these competing moral reasons would have to look like in relation to the evidential reasons.

Amongst those who find something morally suspect about moral deference, there are two broad accounts of what that something is. The first is motivated by similar considerations to those to which Hills was responding. According to one influential view, morally worthy actions must not only be morally right, but must be done for the reasons that make them right. That is to say, the agent's motivating reasons and her moral reasons must coincide.²⁰

Responsiveness to the moral reasons may be taken to require moral understanding of the sort discussed by Hills. The thought is that if one is to act for

¹⁸ See for instance Crisp, "Moral Testimony Pessimism," Hopkins, "What is Wrong with Moral Testimony," Howell, "Google Morals," and Nickel, "Moral Testimony and Its Authority."

¹⁹ Hopkins, "What is Wrong with Moral Testimony," 634.

²⁰ For the canonical expression of this position see Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). She calls this the 'praiseworthiness as responsiveness to moral reasons thesis.' Julia Markovitz ("Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* 119, 2 (2010): 201-42) defends a similar position under the heading of 'the coincident reasons thesis.'

the reasons that make one's action morally right (and therefore be worthy of moral praise) one must grasp the relation between these reasons and one's action. On this proposal, the moral reason not to defer to the testimony of moral experts is that true moral beliefs or mere moral knowledge acquired in this fashion cannot serve to motivate morally worthy action. If we are responsible moral agents, we are of course concerned with doing the right thing, morally speaking. However, this is not the end of what we are reasonably concerned with, when it comes to our actions. We might have reason to (and perhaps even morally ought to) care also about doing the right thing for the right reasons. Given this other concern, the fact that there are both moral and evidential reasons counting in favour of deferring to experts will not settle the matter. There will be a further question about how these reasons can best be weighed against the moral reasons against such deference. If the pessimist is right, the latter kind of moral reason will at least sometimes win out.

There are problems with this argument for moral testimony pessimism. One is that the account of moral worth from which it derives its force is itself controversial. Moreover, even among those who defend this sort of account there is disagreement about whether it poses a problem for moral deference.²¹ We will set these concerns aside however, and suppose that moral deference would in fact interfere with the performance of morally worthy actions.

Still, this argument has an air of self-indulgence. Morally right actions that are not done out of an awareness of the reasons that make them right are still morally right. They may not attain the ideal of moral worth, but a less than morally ideal right action is nonetheless always morally preferable to a wrong action. If this is not granted we lose all grip on these notions. A pessimist who appeals to the sort of view sketched above thus seems to be offering surprising, if not paradoxical, counsel to someone like Gillian. The pessimist objects to deference to moral experts because a non-expert who does this is thereby cutting herself off (at least locally) from the ideal of morally worthy action. However, the non-expert knows that in not deferring she is increasing the probability that she will perform morally wrong actions. As we pointed out earlier, it is likely that in neglecting to defer to the testimony of moral experts, she is thereby proceeding in a way that is itself morally wrong. What the pessimist must claim, then, is that broadly aretaic considerations to do with the moral worth of one's own actions ought (at least sometimes) to trump the straightforward deontic considerations

²¹ Julia Markovits ("Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains," *Philosophical Studies* 158 (2012): 289-311) claims that actions performed because a reliable moral expert says they are right can be morally worthy on her approach.

that in not deferring one is (possibly) already doing something wrong, and (certainly) making oneself more likely to do wrong in the future.

This will be a bitter pill for Gillian to swallow, insofar as she is in fact a morally responsible person. If she has the option of taking steps that will render her less likely to act wrongly, without doing anything morally wrong along the way, it is hard to see how she can be morally justified in not doing so. In tandem with the evidential reasons for deferring, pessimism appears to be both morally and epistemically more dubious than optimism.

We believe this discussion reflects a general issue for pessimists about moral testimony. It is easy to make the following claim look plausible: there is some *pro tanto* reason not to defer to moral experts. This reason might be grounded in epistemic considerations of the kind Hills had in mind, or in moral ones of the kind the current argument is appealing to. However, it is much harder to establish the more interesting claim that *pro tanto* considerations of either sort justify the *sans phrase* claim that it is better not to defer to moral experts in any actual case. On the moral side, we may well rank actions that are morally worthy and morally right more highly than those that are just morally right, but also rank the latter more highly than those that are morally wrong. On the epistemic side, we may well rank moral beliefs that are true and combined with understanding more highly than those that are true but not combined with understanding, but also rank the latter more highly than those that are false. Given that moral deference is conducive to morally right action and true moral belief, then, claims to the effect that reliance on deference cuts one off from something else that is valuable have limited impact. We can call this the ‘*pro tanto* problem’ for pessimism about moral deference.²²

6. No Virtue in Rectitude

There is another line that has made some headway in the literature, one which appeals to moral reasons of a somewhat different sort. On this approach, the problem with moral deference is that this practice interferes with the development of a morally virtuous character. Thus Robert J. Howell writes that while

[t]here might be epistemic dangers associated with moral deference... the real harm is the crippling effect such deference can have on the moral character of the deferring agents.²³

²² See Enoch, “A Defense Of Moral Deference” for a forceful expression of this problem.

²³ Howell, “Google Morals,” 412.

On this view, again, there are moral reasons against forming one's moral beliefs on the basis of expert testimony, only now these reasons are taken to bear on the character of the agent himself as opposed to his action. And again, the claim that reliance on moral experts can serve as an obstacle to the development of a morally virtuous character has some plausibility.

The *pro tanto* problem rears its head again here, however. Let us start once more by considering only the moral reasons on both sides. The moral reasons that appear to support the pessimist argument are – also again – self-regarding, rather than other-regarding. They bear on one's own moral character, and the moral reasons one (presumably) has to promote it. It is doubtful that one can make a plausible moral case against moral deference on such grounds. Consider that if Gillian opts not to take an expert e-reader with her, she is likely to do wrong in situations where, had she heeded the e-reader's counsel, she would have done right. This does not just have an impact on Gillian herself. Her morally wrong actions can have serious, even fatal consequences, for the other denizens of the island. Even in much less extraordinary circumstances, when we do the morally wrong thing we very often cause unnecessary harm to others. Bearing this in mind, it courts the charge of moral preciousness to say that the non-expert ought not to defer out of concern for her own virtue. Once more, the evidential reasons and the moral reasons counting in favour of deference align.

7. Pessimistic About Pessimism

None of the three arguments in support of pessimism about moral testimony discussed above strikes us as attractive. They at best establish that there is some *pro tanto* reason not to defer, which does not itself justify pessimism *sans phrase* about moral deference, either in general or in any particular case. This is the *pro tanto* problem. The failure of the three surveyed arguments for pessimism does not show that there is no good argument to be made.

What it does suggest is that the moral testimony pessimist will have to appeal to a different kind of pragmatic reason than was countenanced above. One possibility worth exploring is that there is something intrinsically morally wrong with moral deference itself. Perhaps there is a strong moral duty not to form one's moral beliefs in certain ways. This latter sort of position has not been explored carefully in the literature. Whether an argument for this kind of view can avoid the danger of high-handedness remains to be seen. As things stand at present in the literature, we are pessimistic about pessimism.

8. In the Pragmatic Mirror

Because of the particular difficulty with finding strong epistemic reasons in favour of *sans phrase* pessimism, the disagreement between moral testimony optimists and pessimists depends to a significant extent on what kind of pragmatic reasons for belief one takes there to be. It is therefore a particularly interesting feature of the moral deference debate that the moral reasons for deferring, or not deferring, track to a significant degree a more general distinction between two types of pragmatic reasons for belief.

There are pragmatic reasons for belief that are consistent with alethic norms. Call these pragmatic reasons ‘convergent.’ The most straightforward examples of convergent reasons occur when what might be called ‘leaps of knowledge’ are possible.²⁴ Leaps of knowledge cases are ones in which any of the relevant beliefs that one comes to have will be true, on account of having it. The classic example of this is Gilbert Harman’s power of positive thinking example (slightly modified here).²⁵

Suppose that Larry has an illness that is, through some mechanism, connected to his doxastic states about the illness. Larry learns about this illness from his doctor, who tells him that, if he believes he will recover, then that belief will in fact cause him to recover. However, if Larry either does not believe that he will recover, or believes that he will not recover, then he will not recover.

On being informed of his illness and its relation to his doxastic states (and assuming that those states are luminous to him), Larry will either have sufficient epistemic reason to believe that he will get better, or he will have sufficient epistemic reason to believe that he will not get better. He will have sufficient reason for the former state if he believes that he will get better, and he will have sufficient reason for the latter state if he either does not believe that he will get better, or believes he will not get better.

Suppose Larry, when he receives the news from his doctor, reasons that because the illness is news to him and he therefore has no particular belief about whether he will recover, he will not recover (having lacked an antecedent belief that he will recover). In doing so, he has arrived at a belief for which there is sufficient epistemic reason. Despite having settled into a stable doxastic state, Larry has strong pragmatic incentives to switch to believing that he will recover. If he does so, there will be no alethic cost - he is guaranteed still to have a true

²⁴ See Reisner, “Leaps of Knowledge.”

²⁵ Gilbert Harman, “Rationality,” in his *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9-46.

belief about his condition and prospects for recovery – and it is pragmatically better for him to believe that he will get better.

There are other types of cases that take a similar form.²⁶ What all these cases have in common is that they provide pragmatic reasons for belief that do not violate a general alethic constraint on reasons for belief. Doing well morally or prudentially with respect to one's beliefs only requires one to believe what one knows to be true, conditional on and because of one's believing it.

The other general type of pragmatic reasons for belief are those that run contrary to the truth and/or to the agent's total evidence. Call these 'non-convergent.' Non-convergent reasons take on a variety of forms, but there have been three general proposals about how they might arise.

One way in which such reasons might arise is from certain kinds of constitutive norms. Sarah Stroud has argued, for example, that it is a constitutive feature of friendship that one is epistemically partial.²⁷ Evidence that one's friends are dishonest or disloyal must receive less weight than the same evidence that those with whom one is not friends are dishonest or disloyal must be given. While Stroud's particular claims involve friendship, the general line of argument is in principle extendable to participation in other kinds of relations or institutions.

Several authors have offered various examples in which there are strong moral or prudential incentives to believe against the evidence.²⁸ This is the second way in which non-convergent reasons may arise. One type of incentive driven reasons arises from external threats or inducements. A sufficiently knowledgeable and powerful being can provide moral incentives to believe against the evidence. These examples take the following general form: the mad scientist will do *x* valuable thing, if you believe *y*, even though the evidence suggests that *y* is not the case.

A separate, but very interesting, class of cases is due to Berislav Marušić. These cases rely on the intertwining of the belief norm on intending and promising with situations in which one would have to believe in the face of evidence against the required belief.²⁹

²⁶ For extended discussion see Reisner, "Leaps of Knowledge," as well as Reisner, "A Short Refutation."

²⁷ Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality."

²⁸ See Sven Danielsson and Jonas Olson, "Brentano and the Buck-Passers," *Mind* 116, 463 (2007): 511-22, Reisner, "The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons," and Stephen Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognition* (Cambridge: M.I.T Press, 1993).

²⁹ Berislav Marušić, "Promising against the Evidence," *Ethics* 123, 2 (2013): 292-317.

It will be helpful to look at two examples. The first is loosely adapted from Marušić's own. It is *The Sociologist's Marriage*. We may imagine that two sociologists are at the altar, about to pronounce their marriage vows to each other. The presiding official at the wedding asks them to follow up various promises with 'forever and ever.' Each sociologist knows that there is less than a one in two chance that they will remain married, or even in love, for the remainder of their natural lives - or even for more than a decade. If there is a belief condition on promising that requires one not to believe that one's promise will not be upheld, then the sociologists can only sincerely take their vows if they believe against the evidence.

The second example exploits a similar belief condition on intention: that one can intend to do something only if one does not believe that one will not do it. This condition makes intending to perform actions with low chances of success problematic. One may imagine that Shackleton, on his small boat en route to Elephant Island, intended the entire way to rescue his shipwrecked crew. We can assume that having that intention was central to his prospects for success, in focusing his activities, providing confidence to his men, etc. Having this intention, if we accept the belief condition, required his not forming the belief best supported by the evidence, namely that he would drown and die a horrible death in the violent southern seas. In both the Sociologist's Wedding and the Shackleton examples, we have cases in which there are prudential and moral inducements to make promises and form intentions that require believing against the evidence. The pragmatic reasons for believing against the evidence in these cases are parasitic on the ordinary moral reasons for promising and intending, rather than arising from direct incentives, as in mad scientist examples.

Returning to Gillian's Island, it is clear that the moral reasons for belief that tell in favour of optimism are convergent reasons. They are not leaps of knowledge cases, but they share the important feature that the truth of the beliefs and the goodness of having them is non-accidentally connected. On Gillian's Island, Gillian will be forced to make morally consequential decisions, the likes of which she has never before faced. If we grant the assumptions of the case, that Gillian is enkratic and that acting on the basis of true moral beliefs more often yields morally better results than does acting on false moral beliefs, then she will have convergent moral reasons for forming moral beliefs based on the expert's testimony.

On the other hand, it is a clear consequence of rejecting moral testimony that the number of Gillian's true, situationally relevant moral beliefs will be much lower than if she were to accept it. If there are moral reasons for requiring moral

understanding or cultivating moral virtue, at the expense of having true moral beliefs or mere moral knowledge, then those reasons are non-convergent.

Conclusion

We have argued that the case for moral testimony pessimism does not look promising at present, either epistemically or morally. This is not to say that there are no *pro tanto* reasons, either epistemic or moral, for pessimism. Rather, it is difficult, at least for us, to see how they will add up to a defence of all-things-considered pessimism.

We have, in effect, suggested that the implicit rankings of epistemic and moral goods put forward by various pessimists are incorrect. We expect that pessimists will disagree. It is thus interesting to consider briefly what it would take for a pessimist to offer a convincing argument in favour of her view.

With respect to epistemic reasons against moral expert testimony, we are not convinced that there is a case to be made. If one denies that there are moral experts, or that they are identifiable, then the issue will be moot. However, unless one is willing to make the rather strong claim that it is conceptually or metaphysically impossible that there are moral experts, the matter's being practically moot does not settle the theoretical question.

That leaves the pessimist with the burden of explaining why acquiring moral beliefs in the same way that one acquires most of one's other beliefs is epistemically problematic. One port of call might be to object to testimony about the *a priori*, but with a little reflection this makes not a small part of most people's knowledge of maths and also sciences that are partially mathematical deeply problematic. It is up to the pessimist to show how we can avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater, or why we ought not to mind doing so. We are sceptical that the pessimist's epistemic burden can be discharged.

If that is right, then the pessimist must defend pessimism by appealing to pragmatic reasons for belief. In principle, there is nothing objectionable about doing so. We have argued that the pragmatic reasons for belief appear to tell in favour of the optimist. To respond convincingly to our criticisms, the pessimist will have to make a case relying on non-convergent pragmatic reasons for belief. While we certainly do not object to the view that there are non-convergent reasons, it is nonetheless interesting to note that pessimists are committed to the existence of the most radical kind of pragmatic reasons for belief, those which are contrary to evidence and often to truth.

Moreover, if all-things-considered pessimism is to be justified, these non-convergent reasons must be weighty enough to override the combined force of the

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moral and evidential considerations on the optimist's side. While nothing we have said strictly rules out *sans phrase* pessimism, we see little reason at present to think that there are more than *pro tanto* reasons, both epistemic and pragmatic, for rejecting moral testimony.