PHILIP NICKEL

MORAL TESTIMONY AND ITS AUTHORITY

ABSTRACT. A person sometimes forms moral beliefs by relying on another person's moral testimony. In this paper I advance a cognitivist normative account of this phenomenon. I argue that for a person's actions to be morally good, they must be based on a recognition of the moral reasons bearing on action. Morality requires people to act from an understanding of moral claims, and consequently to have an understanding of moral claims relevant to action. A person sometimes fails to meet this requirement when she relies on another person's moral testimony, and so there are moral limits on such reliance.

KEY WORDS: action, autonomy, cognitivism, moral epistemology, moral testimony, reasons, understanding

This paper is concerned with dependence on moral testimony, which is a phenomenon in which one person comes to believe a moral claim or to be motivated to act on it because another person asserts it. In particular, it is concerned with just one kind of dependence, which I will call *justificatory dependence on moral testimony*, or *justificatory dependence* for short. Justificatory dependence occurs when one person believes that another person is in a better position to make a moral judgment, and accepts that second person's assertion/reason of a moral claim as to believe it. I will argue that there are moral limits to justificatory dependence, because we require more of agents than that they merely act in accordance with a correct moral belief.

I am presupposing a cognitivist framework for discussing moral testimony. In other words, I assume that moral claims can be true or false, and can be objects of belief. In this I differ from many of those who have discussed moral testimony, moral influence and the like in the recent philosophical past. Early in the Twentieth Century, scientifically-minded philosophers disgruntled with the epistemological status of moral claims held that, since there are no moral facts, moral claims cannot serve as the contents of propositions, and cannot be believed, at least in any robust way. This became the main principle of moral 'non-cognitivism.' Non-cognitivists switched their attention away from the epistemology of moral claims to focus instead on their *practical* function. The point of moral utterances, they thought, is to influence others, to encourage people to change, reconsider, or solidify their moral commitments and behavior.

Ethical Theory and Moral Practice **4**: 253–266, 2001.

The history of non-cognitivism in the Twentieth Century is marked by the progressive realization that, since a *cognitive* mechanism of moral influence is ruled out, human psychology must involve a special and completely different kind of susceptibility to moral utterances. In the earliest stages, this fact was marked by the mere acknowledgement that moral utterances have emotive or prescriptive content capable of affecting others. Ayer, for example, thinks it is "worth mentioning that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action" (N.D., p. 108). C.L. Stevenson actually gives something of a theory of ethical persuasion, allowing both for changes of attitudes through changes in (contingently) associated beliefs and for changes of attitudes through a non-rational method, which "depends on the sheer, direct emotional impact of words – on emotive meaning, rhetorical cadence, apt metaphor, stentorian, stimulating, or pleading tones of voice, dramatic gestures, care in establishing *rapport* with the hearer or audience, and so on" (1944, p. 139). Later, an evolved psychological theory of moral emotions was introduced as a way of explaining the psychological mechanism of moral influence (see, e.g., Gibbard 1990, chs. 6–7). Thus, although it is perhaps true that, as Urmson writes, "the emotive theory of ethics has its origin in epistemological despair" (1968, p. 19), non-cognitivists have ended up paying quite a lot of attention to the ways in which people can influence each other using moral claims, and as a result, this tradition has given rise to compelling accounts of moral influence.

By contrast, throughout the Twentieth Century cognitivists largely ignored the question of moral testimony, and by ignoring it, they failed to address some important issues surrounding the practical function of moral talk. One of the most important reasons people make moral claims involves the influence they hope to have on the behavior and moral attitudes of others. This is a central insight of non-cognitivism. But where non-cognitivists explain moral testimony in terms of the expressive *force* that certain utterances have on attitudes, cognitivists have different tools at their disposal. They may acknowledge that humans are highly susceptible to being influenced by moral judgments and moral rhetoric, but ultimately they must explain the practical function of moral talk in terms of belief. An explanation of this kind will indicate why it is sometimes right to try to influence or to allow oneself to be influenced, and sometimes right not to try to influence, or to avoid being influenced. It will make this explanation in terms of norms for moral belief and action.

In this paper, I will confine my attention to the question of when it is right to allow oneself to be influenced, and when to avoid it. In other words,

I am only looking at moral testimony from the perspective of the person who is trying to figure out what to believe or to do, i.e., the *listener*. I will not discuss moral testimony from the standpoint of the person who is making various moral claims, i.e., the *testifier*. This is not to say that it is not sometimes an important and difficult moral question when to make a moral utterance, or more specifically when to try to advise someone morally. My moral claim may cause the listener to revolt against me, or to break down and cry, or it may be misunderstood. Furthermore, I may worry about my own justification for any moral claim I make, or feel it is hypocritical to make it. But these are difficulties of *giving* moral advice or uttering moral claims, not difficulties of *relying* or being *dependent* on someone's moral testimony.

As I have defined dependence on moral testimony, it encompasses a number of different possible relations of dependence of a listener B on a testifier A for some moral claim M. The following list gives some of the more important ways (though it is not exhaustive).

(1) **Heuristic Dependence** M is a moral claim which B had not previously considered. Once A utters M, B considers it and is in a position to have a complete justification and motivational disposition for it.
(2) **Demonstrative Dependence** When A utters M, it brings to B's attention the *moral* salience of some further fact of which B was aware but had not considered relevant.
(3) **Substitutive Dependence** A's utterance of M gives B a reason to believe M, which serves as a substitute for an independent (non-deferential) justification.
(4) **Motivational Dependence** A's utterance of M gives B the motivational encouragement necessary to put B in a position to act on the basis of M.

As I said earlier, my focus is on what I call 'justificatory dependence.' This encompasses, at least, (2) and (3), Demonstrative and Substitutive Dependence. As for (4), Motivational Dependence, it is of considerable interest but demands a separate treatment.

I start with the admission that sometimes one person comes to hold a correct moral belief because of another person's utterance. Dependence on moral testimony can sometimes *work out*, in the crudest sense. In what follows, let us consider the most salutary cases of moral testimony, in which the person who comes to act or believe correctly does so because she comes to believe a moral claim sincerely uttered by another person, whom she reasonably trusts, and who herself has a reasonably full understanding and

justification of the claim. I will argue that in many circumstances, a person who relies on a moral utterance in this way will not be in a position to act in a morally good way. Furthermore, it is sometimes morally wrong for her to allow herself to get in a position in which dependence on moral testimony is necessary. For this reason she may be morally culpable if the testimony leads her astray.

Suppose my friend has asked me to loan him some money for rent, but it seems likely to me that if I loan him the money it will allow him to avoid a crisis in which he might come to terms with his addiction to heroin and alcohol. I cannot decide what to do, and I ask my mother what she thinks. According to her, I ought to tell my friend that I will loan him some money as soon as he gets his life together. In such a case, is it permissible for me to rely on my mother's word as my justification? What if my friend wants to know, as he has been evicted from his apartment, why I decided as I did? It seems doubtful to me that he would be satisfied by the reply, "That's what my mother told me I should do. She is much more experienced than I am at making decisions about this kind of thing, and she knows what to do." Nor *should* he be satisfied by this reply. In cases such as this, there is something lacking about my justification if I offer no independent support for my moral beliefs, but only defer to my mother's better judgment.

This case evokes an intuition about what sort of justification can be acceptably given by one person to another person. In part, this intuition has to do with *interpersonal* justification, which features conspicuously in some well-known contemporary accounts of moral justification. For example, Thomas Scanlon's contractualist moral theory makes justifiability to others the standard of moral permissibility (1998, p. 153). I appeal to intuitions about interpersonal justification because I think that they can, with care, be used to gauge the quality of moral and political justifications in themselves. But in making this appeal, I do not want to suggest that interpersonal justification is the crux of moral justification. Although Scanlon's view, or something similar, might serve as the basis for a critique of dependence on moral testimony, that is not my approach. Instead, I locate the problem with justificatory dependence, not directly in its failure to provide intuitively acceptable interpersonal justifications, but rather in its incompatibility with a central requirement of moral action. Our intuitions about interpersonal justifications are motivated by this more fundamental requirement.

One way of explaining this requirement is as follows. Morality aims at guiding action rationally, i.e. *from* a recognition of the relevant moral requirements. A moral agent must be responsive to morality as such. One

strong way to make this claim is to hold that it is impossible to act morally if one has never considered and adopted anything like a *principle* or a *rule* with moral content. But we need not put it this way. The claim could equally well be true even if morality did not appear in the guise of principles or rules (though when properly understood this terminology is very convenient). More neutrally, we may say that, in a morally good action, moral considerations must play a role, mediated by cognition or rationality, either in deliberation or in the formation of the psychological states which lead one to act as one does. Consider the example of a child who is brought up to interact with others in ways that usually do not violate principles of moral behavior. This training is carried out through orders and behavioral conditioning (e.g., saying "Go to your room!" at certain times), without grounding explanations or distinctly moral concepts. Suppose now that once the child is grown, in somewhat different company, she comes to possess certain distinctly moral concepts. She recognizes the moral claims that others would apply to her actions, though she does not adopt them herself, and indeed holds them in no special esteem. But she feels the powerful force of her earlier conditioning, and often acts in accordance with moral rules because of it. Suppose, for example, that she returns some sheet music she has borrowed; not because there are moral reasons to do so (though she believes that, for better or worse, morality requires this); but simply because she was punished as a child in very similar circumstances. Intuitively, it seems to me, such a person does not act in a morally worthy way, even though she does recognize what morality requires, and even though she has a learned disposition to act in accordance with morality across some ranges of circumstances. What is missing is action *on the basis of* a recognition of what morality requires, in the sense I specified above; moral cognition must play a (direct or indirect) role in deliberation and action.[1]

If this is right, it must be the case that morality requires one to *act* from an understanding of moral claims, and therefore to *have* an understanding of moral claims that are relevant to action. I will call this the Recognition Requirement. To recognize a moral claim for what it is, an agent must have a fairly rich assortment of accompanying concepts already in place. Understanding is relational in the sense that many claims can only be understood if their *prima facie* justificatory basis – consisting in *prima facie*

[1]See Aristotle's remarks in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a30ff (1999, p. 22).

reasons which support them – is clear to the agent. A person must grasp, by and large, what would count as support for a moral belief in order to understand it. The Recognition Requirement has to do with action, but it has to do with the part of action that lies within an agent: her psychological and motivational makeup. Morality is not merely concerned with outcomes, but also with intentions or motives. (That is why virtue is primarily a property of agents, not of actions.) It is not virtuous merely to want to do what is moral, *whatever that may be*. In the case above, where I rely on my mother's moral testimony, I have a motivation to do what is moral, *whatever that may be*. But I am not a virtuous agent because, when I act, I am not doing so out of a recognition of the salient moral features of the situation. I do not understand the relevant moral claims which bear on the case.

Understanding a moral claim is central to a correct interpretation of the Recognition Requirement. One of the most important abilities associated with understanding a moral claim is the ability to articulate its justification. The ability does not have to be global: agents need not be able to articulate the reasons which support the central or obvious moral claims that they believe. For example, when asked why murder is wrong, a good moral agent may have very little to say. She may simply ask, "Don't you see?" or she may be at a loss for just what problem there could be with the claim. This does not imply that the agent grasps no reasons for claims such as these, only that she has difficulty articulating them without further prompting, precisely *because* the claims seem obvious or uncontroversial. (Philosophers, however, sometimes get into the business of supplying all-purpose justifications for central claims.) For less central, less obvious claims, a person must typically be able to articulate reasons in their support in order to understand them. This is because deliberation requires her to draw upon resources which should make it clear to her what is controversial about the claim, hence also what needs to be articulated in its support. For example, when a person's career interests conflict with her duties to her family, it will not seem surprising to her that her family may demand an articulate justification of her actions. Her deliberation will put her in a position to respond to these demands. This gives us some idea why understanding is connected with an ability to articulate reasons for moral claims in the way that it is.

Besides the ability to articulate reasons, there are other abilities closely associated with understanding a moral claim. The most important of these are the ability to evaluate a justification of a moral claim made by another person, the ability to apply moral claims at appropriate times, the ability

to establish coherence among the various moral claims one believes, and of course, the ability to act accordingly. (I set aside issues of motivational efficacy pertinent to the last of these, since it is unclear whether proper motivation should be included as one of the reasons required to justify moral claims). We attribute an understanding of a moral claim to an agent unequivocally if she has all or most of these abilities. Understanding is a matter of degree, however, so that she may have some degree of understanding even when she fails this criterion in certain ways. A high level of understanding (which I will call, for convenience, 'full' understanding) is a matter of having a grasp of the relevant reasons bearing on action, or in other words, having a grasp of the justificatory basis of the claim. This grasp of the justificatory basis enables one to discern features of a situation which make a given claim true (and which also make other related claims true). It follows that understanding a claim fully also enables one to discern features which would make the claim false (and which make other related claims false). In this way, at least, moral claims are similar to any other type of claim or proposition, the full understanding of which depends on justificatory abilities.

The understanding of sentences is not atomistic. For example, as Gareth Evans has argued in a different context, if a person understands the sentence "Bill is happy," she will be able to apply some other sentences about Bill, e.g., "Bill is fat." She will also be able to apply some other sentences predicating happiness, e.g., "Lisa is happy" or "Dawn is happy," etc. (Evans 1982, pp. 100–102; cf. Nagel 1970, p. 101). Moreover, she will be able to apply "Bill is not happy." The "ability to apply" these sentences amounts to a sensitivity to justification-conditions – an ability to tell what counts in favor of saying Bill is happy, fat, not happy, etc. The same point may be made about understanding moral sentences. If I understand "Socrates should have fled prison," then I should be capable of applying some other related sentences such as "Geronimo Pratt should flee prison," "I should flee prison," and "Socrates should *not* have fled prison" under circumstances in which relevant facts hold. In other words, I will be sensitive to the justification-conditions for these other sentences. The ability to apprehend and assess relevant reasons, e.g., "The system imprisoned X without due process," or, "Capital punishment is illegitimate," is necessary to understand any of these claims fully.

Now that it is somewhat clearer what I take to be involved in understanding a moral claim, I want to apply the Recognition Requirement to cases of moral testimony. Because of the Recognition Requirement, morality requires more of agents than that they have a correct belief concern-

ing some moral claim. It requires agents to *understand* the moral claim, in the sense I have indicated. However, in many cases all that moral testimony provides is a correct moral belief without understanding. Therefore, although moral testimony may give rise to a correct moral belief in these cases and thus "work out" in the crudest sense, it does not provide a basis for morally good action. In what follows, I develop this claim, that requirements of understanding limit moral dependence, in two ways. First, I show that the justificatory interrelationship of moral claims means that it is unusual for a moral claim to be idle with respect to action. For this reason, there are few moral claims that have a negligible relationship to action, and whose justificatory basis can therefore be ignored. Because of this, the limitations to moral dependence imposed by the Recognition Requirement are wide-ranging. In a way, this inference implies that the first part of the Recognition Requirement, ("Morality requires one to act from an understanding of moral claims"), is related to the second part ("Morality requires one to have an understanding of moral claims that are relevant to action"). Second, I show that being morally dependent makes one more vulnerable to error.

The first point is that even in contexts where I am considering some moral claim C that is not immediately relevant to action, the Recognition Requirement is not neutral toward the claim *if* C is related to other claims bearing immediately on action. My understanding of other claims which *are* relevant to action is better when I believe and understand C than when I believe C without understanding it. My failure to grasp what counts as a justification of the claim will have consequences in areas that are potentially relevant to my actions or the actions of those around me. It is impossible fully to understand a moral claim in one context without being capable of applying it in many other contexts, that is, without being aware of its conditions of application and the potential justifications for it. Even if I am not a potential murderer, if I do not understand why I should not kill Smith, then I will not be capable of responding morally to other possible situations in which related justificatory concerns are at issue. Suppose Smith is threatening my life, and I am in a position to kill him in self-defense. If I am not in some sense responsive to the grounds which support not killing Smith in the general case, then I will not be able to see the ways in which killing in self-defense is different. My failure to understand why I should not kill in general will undermine my reasoning when I am in a position to kill Smith in self-defense.

This is why many beliefs gained from moral dependence (including past-tense beliefs, e.g., "Socrates should have fled prison") are deficient: such

claims, if relied on without independent justification, are not fully understood, and are not capable of having their proper general action-guiding force. They are not appropriately linked up with the epistemic framework that enables one to be responsive to moral reasons. Insofar as such beliefs contain some insight, it is not an insight that can have any effect on the way the agent thinks about other more pressing matters. Insofar as their justificatory basis bears a similarity to that in some other domain, it is not a similarity which can bring better understanding for other claims. For this reason, the Recognition Requirement is not indifferent to moral dependence, even when the claim relied upon does not directly concern the actions of the dependent person. There are few moral claims which have a negligible relationship to action, and whose justificatory basis can therefore be ignored. Such a formulation represents the first of the two points I want to make in elaborating the claim that requirements of understanding limit moral dependence. The Recognition Requirement has broad implications for moral belief.

The second elaboration of the claim that requirements of understanding limit moral dependence is that someone who relies on moral testimony for some action-guiding claim C is more prone to error, that is, less likely to apply it correctly when acting than someone who has an independent justification for C. She will not be as flexible or responsive when acting. Obviously, there is a sense in which belief resulting from moral dependence may guide action correctly in unchanging conditions. But if I have not weighed the relevant considerations myself, then I will be ill-prepared to respond to changes that arise. In the case above, where I rely on my mother's testimony, I will not know what to do if my friend gets an infection, or if he stops using heroin but begins drinking more heavily. I will not act well if it is impossible for me to determine when my belief no longer applies, or when it applies differently, on the basis of a grasp of relevant supporting reasons. For this reason, having an understanding of moral claims is instrumental to acting well.

By now it should be clearer why meeting the Recognition Requirement is a virtue related to agency and moral belief, and why certain kinds of justificatory dependence are ways of failing to be virtuous. An agent cannot allow her moral beliefs to remain detached from the reasons which support them; she must try to ensure that she is in a proper position to act from a recognition of what morality requires, and she is culpable for failing to do so. This is why, for moral beliefs, the individual believer is subject to a substantial epistemological duty to be able to tell what counts as a justification for a variety of moral claims.

How does this duty get spelled out in practice? Suppose, for example, that someone – I'll call her "Sandia" – is trying to decide whether to move to Bombay to work on an engineering project there. She fears that her children might not adjust well to living in India, and she does not know whether to take them with her, to leave them behind with a relative, or to remain on her current project at home. Sandia's close friend Lisa is well-acquainted with every detail of Sandia's situation, and Sandia reasonably trusts Lisa. Lisa reasonably asserts that Sandia should take her children to India with her, suggesting at the same time that Sandia is not considering the matter clearly.

Suppose Sandia comes to believe and act on Lisa's claim, but *without* also having, or being given, some rudimentary justification for the claim. Now, either (A) she does not know what counts as such a justification, i.e. she does not understand the claim, or (B) she understands the claim but is not acting on the basis of her understanding, together with her knowledge of the relevant reasons that actually hold. If (A) is true, then Sandia has an epistemic deficiency, for which she may or may not be culpable. If she is culpable for the deficiency, then she will be morally culpable for failing to put herself in a proper position to act in the situation, and responsible if the testimony she relies upon leads her astray. In either case, she will be not be acting on the basis of her recognition of what morality requires, and so her action will not be morally good. If (B) is true, then Sandia is doing something morally wrong. The very things which count as justifications are pressing in on her from all sides: her children's future, her career, the uncertainty of moving, etc. If she does not herself connect these facts, as reasons, to her understanding of relevant ought-claims, then she is simply refusing to engage with the situation as a moral agent. Failure to meet the Recognition Requirement explains what is wrong with cases like this. When the dependent agent acts, she does not act because she recognizes what morality requires; she does not have a grasp of the relevant reasons bearing on her decision.

However, there are also cases of dependence which differ, in that the agent relies on moral testimony only in figuring out how to weigh various reasons, or in order to figure out which reasons are relevant in the situation at hand. Imagine another version of the Sandia/Lisa case, in which Sandia has a partial justification for the claim that she ought to move because she is aware of the relevant reasons pushing in both directions. But in this version of the case, Sandia does not know how to *weigh* these reasons. She at first doubts that she ought to move to India, but she overcomes her doubts by relying on Lisa's testimony. In this case Sandia seems to

meet the Recognition Requirement with respect to the claim from which she acts ("I ought to move to India"); intuitively it seems to me that we would accord Sandia an understanding of this claim. Although she is not confident in weighing the relevant reasons against one another, she does *have* a grasp of the relevant reasons, and in that sense she *understands* the ought-claim she comes to hold on the basis of testimony. When she acts, she does so with a conception of the relevant reasons in mind.

Even though Sandia seems to meet the Recognition Requirement in this version of the case, there still may be some ways in which she fails to be an ideal moral agent, having to do with her inability to weigh or assess reasons correctly. First, it is possible that she has a tendency to overemphasize her children's immediate well-being across a variety of cases (perhaps by having unmotivated fears about her children, and making overly conservative decisions). If this is true, then Lisa's utterance may serve an educational function, though it does not fully correct the underlying problem. Sandia may come to have a justification for thinking that her reasoning is biased – something which gives her the ability independently and more accurately to compensate for, and perhaps even to begin to correct, her pattern of biased decisions. Thus she may attempt to compensate for her weakness as an agent even though she cannot eliminate it, by trying to adjust her judgments according to some corrective principle which she can apply when she sees that a case is of a kind in which the problem arises. Second, Sandia might fail to have an adequate understanding of the moral claims which weigh or assess the reasons at hand, e.g., "This career opportunity is worth taking significant risks for," "Family togetherness is more important than children's educational continuity." She might be unable to articulate a justification for these kinds of claims and unable to apply them across cases. In this event, she relies on Lisa's testimony as a substitute for having an independent justification for these 'reason-assessing' claims. But this seems distinct from a failure to meet the Recognition Requirement. These claims are subordinate to the claim that ultimately provides the basis for Sandia's action, they guide her action only indirectly. Thus the idea of basing action on a recognition of such claims is not as clear, and it is hard to see how one can criticize Sandia on the basis of the Recognition Requirement.

There are also other important justificatory deficiencies that may lead one to depend on moral testimony. Reliance on others to point out the moral salience of certain non-moral facts – Demonstrative Dependence from our earlier list – is a kind of justificatory dependence. Karen Jones (1999) has suggested, for example, that it might be a matter of some difficulty to de-

termine whether somebody is sexist; some people might be insensitive to this kind of fact. The facts of the matter, for example treating women differentially in conversational topic or mode, may be difficult to discern but bear importantly on moral decisions. Someone who has a problem seeing the salience of these facts when enmeshed in various situations will have a hard time bringing considerations of sexism to bear on her actions. Like the problem of overestimating the importance of a kind of reason, this problem has a systematic impact on moral deliberation. Unlike the problem of weighing reasons one already acknowledges against one another, however, here the problem cannot be so readily compensated for, since *ex hypothesi* there is no tracking, or very bad tracking, of the reasons themselves. Still, when a person with this problem acts dependently, she does so with a conception of the relevant reasons in mind.

Having only these other sorts of problems, inability to weigh reasons properly and failure to track particular kinds of reasons, is consistent with meeting the Recognition Requirement. One's actions can be morally good even when one overcomes these problems through moral testimony. It is only when one has a more global inability to grasp relevant reasons, or when one refuses to do so, that one cannot act morally well.

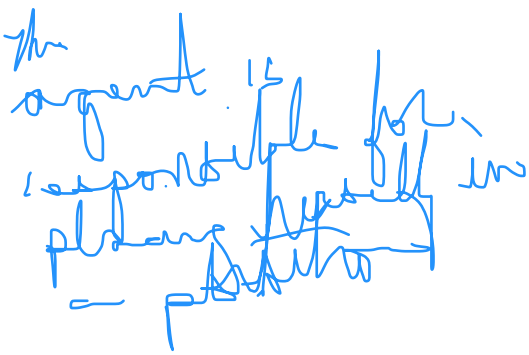
To clarify the position I have outlined, it is worth considering a couple of objections. The first objection claims that the Recognition Requirement is morally unimportant. Consider the case I gave earlier of the person who received behavioral conditioning as a child and was trained to behave in superficially moral ways, before learning about morality later; she does not base her action on her own knowledge of morality, but behaves in a particular way only because she is conditioned to do so. I claimed that this person's actions are not morally good; they do not have any moral value because the person is not acting on account of any awareness of what morality requires. One way to agree with that assessment, while rejecting the lesson I draw from it, would be to suggest that this person does not care about morality at all, even though she knows what it requires. Those who rely on moral testimony as a substitute for having their own justifications are different. They act out of a desire to do what is moral without having a very precise idea what that amounts to. Hence they act with good intentions, and that is why their actions can be morally good. For these reasons, no criticism of dependence on moral testimony can be made on these moral-theoretical grounds.

In response to this objection, I point out that the conditioned person *does* intend to do what she knows to be moral. But the fact that a person merely has the desire or intention to do what is morally required is insufficient for her action to be morally good. It seems to me that morality requires one to

be responsive to the value of people and their projects, to the law, to property, and so on. Hume claims in the *Treatise* that "no action can be virtuous or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it distinct from the sense of its morality" (1969, III, 2, i). But not just any motive distinct from the sense of its morality is sufficient. The motive must have a certain structure. Hume gives an account of that structure which is probably inconsistent with the Recognition Requirement as I have formulated it – but it seems to me that there is something quite right about this demand. From the standpoint of assessing motivations, it is not enough merely to act with the knowledge that something is morally required. In order to act well, one must have a sense of the independent importance of various considerations, and act on the basis of that sense. This is why both the person who acts well because of conditioning, and the person who acts well because of a mere desire to do what is moral fail in the same way. They each fail to act out of a sense of what is important.

The second objection claims that the Recognition Requirement is toothless because it never overrides the need to act correctly by whatever epistemic means. Whenever I am likely to act better by being dependent on moral testimony, I should be dependent. That is what it means to be a responsible agent in cases of epistemic limitations: to do what one can to ensure that one acts rightly. Hence there is no principled limitation on justificatory dependence.

In response to this objection, I argue that we should distinguish the question of when it is right to seek moral advice or testimony from the questions whether it is possible to act well on the basis of that testimony, and whether one is culpable if things go wrong when one so acts. I have already granted that moral testimony can sometimes "work out" in the crudest sense. Furthermore, often accepting somebody's moral testimony is clearly the right thing to do. But holding a belief or acting on the basis of that testimony does not free one of moral responsibility. The situation is somewhat analogous to a case in which one person has slighted another and is now in a position to apologize. The question of whether the person acted rudely has already been answered, and now it is a matter of deciding how to redress the problem. In the central case of moral dependence I have been considering, the person has already failed to put herself in a position to act based on a recognition of what morality requires, and is culpable for failing to do so. Furthermore, it is not possible for her primary action to be morally good. But that is an evaluative question distinct from the question of whether she ought to rely on someone's moral testimony, *given* that she has put herself in that position. Seeking out advice could still be morally good.



In any case, there is a sense in which the Recognition Requirement sometimes does override the need to act correctly by whatever means. Parents are encouraged to give their children room to make independent moral judgments instead of directing their lives for them, even if it can lead them to make serious mistakes. And in general in our own decision-making we focus more on the question of what we ought to do rather than on the question of who knows best what we ought to do, because of the Recognition Requirement. This is true even when we would be more likely to do the right thing by pursuing the answer to the latter question. If acting from a recognition of what morality requires had no distinct value, then our practices would be rather different. For example, it might be permissible for parents to allow their children to continue to rely on them, as a substitute for reasoning independently, as long as it was practical. Indeed it might be better, in general, if we could identify those who are really good moral judges, and rely on them as much as possible instead of reasoning on our own. But in fact we find these practices unappealing because we value full-fledged agency, and this is because independent moral reasoning is promoted by a central feature of morality. The picture suggested here is meant to help reconcile this feature with the social nature of moral language, so that cognitivism can come to terms with the issue.

References

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.
Ayer, A.J., *Language, Truth, and Logic*. London: Dover, N.D.
Evans, Gareth, in John McDowell (ed.), *The Varieties of Reference.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
Gibbard, Allen, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
Hume, David, in Ernest C. Mossner (ed.), *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Penguin, 1969.
Jones, Karen, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* XCVI (February 1999), pp. 55–78.
Nagel, Thomas, *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
Scanlon, Thomas, *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
Stevenson, C.L., *Ethics and Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944.
Urmson, J.O. *The Emotive Theory of Ethics*. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1968.

Department of Philosophy
UCLA
321 Dodd Hall, 405 Hilgard Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA