

SKEPTICISM ABOUT MORAL EXPERTISE AS A PUZZLE FOR MORAL REALISM

Author(s): SARAH MCGRATH

Source: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (MARCH 2011), pp. 111-137

Published by: Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23039026>

Accessed: 28-03-2020 12:45 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Journal of Philosophy, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Philosophy*

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME CVIII, NO. 3, MARCH 2011

SKEPTICISM ABOUT MORAL EXPERTISE AS A PUZZLE FOR MORAL REALISM*

In this paper, I explore a neglected puzzle for the moral realist. I then canvass some potential responses. Although I endorse one response as the most promising of those I survey, my primary goal is to make vivid how formidable the puzzle is, as opposed to offering a definitive solution.

I. MORAL DEFERENCE

There is something off-putting about the idea of arriving at one's moral views by simply deferring to an expert. By contrast, there is no problem with deferring to a tax specialist about one's taxes. In the case of taxes, if one wants to bypass the struggle of figuring out what one owes, one can simply pile all of the relevant information into a box and drop it off for someone else to process. But there seems to be something problematic about bypassing the struggle of figuring out what one owes, morally speaking, and leaving this for someone else to determine. The asymmetry can appear puzzling. If it is fine to defer to a tax specialist when one's finances get complicated, why is it not equally appropriate to defer to a moral specialist when one's life gets complicated in morally significant ways?

Of course, the extent to which moral deference is appropriate is a controversial matter. Disagreement about this general issue is among the key theological divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism, and this disagreement is echoed in philosophy. The Protestant tradition, in prioritizing the individual conscience over the dictates of

*Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the University of Notre Dame, Temple University, Princeton University, and at the Eastern Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association; I am grateful to those audiences for their feedback. In addition, I would like to thank Robert Audi, Elizabeth Harman, Thomas Kelly, and the anonymous referees for this JOURNAL for helpful suggestions.

would-be mediating authorities, finds perhaps its clearest secular reflection in the Kantian emphasis on the moral significance of *autonomy*. Thus, writing within the broadly Kantian tradition, Robert Paul Wolff commends the practice of the “autonomous man,” which he describes as follows:

The autonomous man...may learn from others about his moral obligations, but only in the sense that a mathematician learns from other mathematicians—namely by hearing from them arguments whose validity he recognizes even though he did not think of them himself.... He does not learn as one learns from an explorer, by accepting as true... accounts of things he cannot see for himself.¹

By contrast, writing within the broadly Catholic tradition, Elizabeth Anscombe defends the view that there is nothing problematic about deference to a genuine moral authority—in the form of church teaching, or otherwise:

A man may have reason to judge that another man's moral counsel is more reliable than his own unaided conscience... he may, moreover, have reason to believe that some public source of moral teaching is more reliable than his own judgment.²

In such cases, Anscombe suggests, the reasonable course is to defer to the source that one takes to be more reliable. Others take the same view: although undoubtedly a strange bedfellow for Anscombe in some respects, Peter Singer has similarly defended the idea that there is nothing especially problematic about moral expertise, and thus, presumably, about moral deference.³

There are, then, deep disagreements about the place of expertise within the moral domain. Significantly, however, even many of those who are most sympathetic to the idea of genuine moral expertise assume that an important aspect of the expert's role is that of providing reasons why, for example, a given type of conduct is morally wrong.⁴ The thought is that ideally, those to whom the teaching is addressed

¹ Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 13.

² G. E. M. Anscombe, “Authority in Morals,” in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe Volume III: Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 46–47.

³ See especially Peter Singer, “Moral Experts,” *Analysis*, xxxii, 4 (March 1972): 115–17, and “Ethical Experts in a Democracy,” in David Rosenthal and Fadlou Sehad, eds., *Applied Ethics and Ethical Theory* (Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 1988), pp. 149–61.

⁴ This assumption seems clearly reflected in, for example, papal encyclicals, as well as in the practice of the kind of secular expert ethics panels that Singer is concerned to defend. As C. A. J. Coady (another philosopher broadly sympathetic to the possibility of acquiring moral knowledge via testimony) notes, “When someone tells me that what I am proposing to do is immoral, I do not react by asking for his credentials but for his reasons.” Coady, *Testimony* (New York: Oxford, 1994), p. 71.

would recognize these reasons as compelling, and as providing a sufficient basis for refraining from the conduct in question. Where such recognition is not forthcoming, things are less than ideal. By contrast, it does not seem particularly important that one have much of a grasp on how exactly the tax specialist arrives at his estimate of what one owes: even if one treats his role in the process as essentially a black-box mechanism, nothing of significance is lost.

Let us reserve the term *deference* for cases in which one holds a view solely because another person holds that view. For example, if I believe, solely on the basis your testimony, that we should turn left rather than right at the next light in order to reach our destination, then I defer to you about which way we should turn.⁵ Similarly, suppose that I believe that capital punishment is wrong, not because of a conviction that it has such-and-such features which render it morally impermissible, but rather simply because you told me that it is wrong. (Perhaps if left to my own unaided judgment, I would believe that capital punishment is permissible, or else have no opinion at all about its moral status, in the same way that I might have no opinion about which way we should turn in the absence of your direction.) In that case, I defer to you as to the morality of capital punishment.

Again, a potentially puzzling asymmetry looms. At the very least, there seems to be something odd or peculiar about my genuinely believing that capital punishment is wrong simply on the basis of your testimony, in a way that there is nothing similarly odd or peculiar about my believing that we should turn left simply on the basis of your testimony, or my believing that I owe a certain amount of money to the government on the basis of my accountant's testimony. Of course, there are at least some cases of moral deference that everyone will agree are unproblematic. For example, I might defer to your judgment on some moral question if I know that you possess relevant non-moral information that I lack. Our moral views about which Nazis committed the most egregious atrocities are sensitive to the historical information we possess about who was responsible for giving which orders, and so on. If I know that we possess similar moral sensibilities but that you are better informed about the relevant historical facts, then it makes sense for me to defer to your judgments about the relative moral turpitude of individual Nazis. In this kind of case, although I defer to your moral judgments, I do not treat you as a *moral*

⁵ Notice that here, holding a view "solely because another person holds that view" does not imply or suggest that one lacks independent reason to think that the person is reliable. (Indeed, my decision to defer to you about which way we should turn might be due to my background knowledge that your sense of direction is superior to mine.)

expert in the relevant sense. Your relative expertise concerns history and not morality: insofar as there is a sense in which you do possess superior moral expertise in virtue of your superior historical knowledge, it is expertise of a highly derivative sort.⁶

Perhaps there are other cases in which moral deference is as straightforward as nonmoral deference. Suppose that I know that you and I share the same moral sensibility, but that with respect to some particular question that is before us my judgment is impaired in a way that yours is not. Perhaps I am too angry or too drunk to think clearly, or I am too personally involved to see things aright. In such circumstances, I might view deference to your judgment as deference to my unimpaired self, in much the way that I view deference to your historically informed judgments about the relative turpitude of particular Nazis as deference to my better-informed self. Similarly, two people who disagree about what constitutes a fair division of goods between them might ask a passing stranger to settle the dispute, not because they suspect that the stranger possesses some moral wisdom or knowledge that they lack, but rather because the stranger's judgment is relatively unbiased.⁷

Let us call cases such as these *impure* cases of moral deference. In contrast, a pure case of moral deference would be a case of the following sort:

I possess all of the nonmoral information thought relevant to the moral permissibility of the death penalty that you possess, and I have no special reason to think that my judgment is impaired. On the basis of this information and my own careful consideration of the issue, either it seems to me that the death penalty is morally permissible, or I remain undecided. Nevertheless, I judge that the practice is not permissible, on the basis of your testimony to that effect.

⁶ Cf. Allan Gibbard's discussion of "contextual" authority, which "presupposes a context of shared norms." He writes:

Might I take someone else's accepting something normative as my own reason for accepting it? In some cases I might well. Suppose that you tell me it made no sense for Cleopatra to be angry at the messenger. I am ignorant of history, perhaps, and confident that you know your history, and that you and I share the same basic norms for anger. In that case, I can take your normative reasoning as proxy for my own. I think that you are reasoning just as I would if I knew the facts. I can let you draw normative conclusions for me, and so I take the fact that you draw a normative conclusion as reason for accepting it myself.

Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990), p. 174. As this passage suggests, Gibbard is not specifically concerned with the case of morality but with the normative realm more generally.

⁷ The last example is borrowed from Montaigne via Julia Driver, "Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise," *Philosophical Studies*, cxxviii, 3 (April 2006): 619–44.

In such a case, I in effect treat you as possessing purely moral information that I lack. In this respect, pure moral deference involves treating someone as a genuine moral expert in a very strong sense.⁸

Consider then

The datum: Pure moral deference seems more problematic than deference in many other domains.

In what follows, I will explore what the datum suggests about the nature of morality. As we shall see, certain meta-ethical views offer ready explanations for the datum, while others struggle to account for it. In particular, for reasons that I offer in the next section, the datum is at least initially puzzling given a broadly realist view about morality, in a way that it is not at all puzzling on various rival views. Before we consider its potential significance, however, a few clarificatory remarks about the datum are in order.

First, notice that the datum makes no mention of moral testimony *per se*. Although it is sometimes claimed that there is something strange about moral testimony, on the present view any such strangeness is a special case of a more general phenomenon.⁹ While testimony is a particularly common and salient route by which we learn the moral views of others, there are, of course, other routes. Suppose that you actively attempt to conceal your opposition to capital punishment from me, perhaps out of an overzealous desire not to interfere with the exercise of my own autonomous moral judgment. Nevertheless, I discover that you strongly disapprove of capital punishment—perhaps by observing your involuntary grimaces whenever others mention the practice in your presence. As a result, I adopt your strongly negative attitude as my own. On the face of it, this seems no less (and no more) odd than a case in which I defer to you about the morality of capital punishment after learning of your view on the basis of testimony.

Second, notice that the datum seems to hold for moral judgments of varying levels of generality and of various kinds. On the one hand,

⁸ The distinction between impure and pure moral deference corresponds, at least roughly, to Gibbard's distinction between "contextual authority" (see note 6) and "fundamental authority" as discussed in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 174–81. According to Gibbard, "even if it is limited and mutual, fundamental authority is puzzling" in a way that contextual authority is not (p. 176).

⁹ See, for example, Philip Nickel, "Moral Testimony and Its Authority," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, iv, 3 (September 2001): 253–66; and Robert Hopkins, "What Is Wrong with Moral Testimony?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lxxiv, 3 (2007): 611–34. For defenses of moral testimony, see Karen Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge," this JOURNAL, xcvi, 2 (February 1999): 55–78; and Coady, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–75.

it seems that there is something peculiar about my believing the general moral principle that capital punishment is wrong if the only basis for my conviction is the fact that this is what you believe. But it seems no less peculiar for me to defer to your judgment about the moral status of some token action or event, for example, the wrongness of a particular execution. Similarly, it seems that there would be something odd about my adopting a belief about what I myself have most moral reason to do on the basis of pure moral deference. For example, it would be extremely odd for me to believe that I have strong moral reasons to avoid eating meat solely on the basis of your say-so, where this is not a matter of my suspecting that you are better informed about the relevant nonmoral facts, or that I am in the grip of some kind of bias. But as some of the other examples that we have considered make clear, the same sense of peculiarity seems to attach to deference regarding moral judgments that do not directly concern one's own behavior. In these respects, the scope of the phenomenon seems quite broad.

In another respect, however, the datum is relatively weak: the claim is not that pure moral deference is more problematic than nonmoral deference, but rather that it *seems* more problematic. Perhaps the seeming strangeness of moral deference is mere appearance, and deference about morality is (or ought to be) as straightforward a matter as deference about local geography. That is, perhaps our sense that there is something odd or peculiar about moral deference is simply mistaken. Even if that is the case, it is still true that moral deference strikes us, or many of us, as peculiar in a way that deference about geography does not. Given this, we can ask what explains this fact.

II. COGNITIVIST AND NONCOGNITIVIST EXPLANATIONS OF THE DATUM

Cognitivism is the view that moral sentences such as "capital punishment is wrong" typically express truth-evaluable propositions when uttered on particular occasions; in sincerely uttering the sentence, one expresses a belief that one holds. Noncognitivists deny these claims. According to the noncognitivist, when one utters the sentence, "Capital punishment is wrong," one is not describing anything or saying something that is true or false. Thus, according to the brand of emotivism associated with Ayer, one is expressing one's disapproval of capital punishment; according to Stevenson, one is expressing a kind of "unfavorable interest" in capital punishment; according to Gibbard, one is expressing one's acceptance of a system of norms that proscribe the practice.¹⁰ Notice that noncognitivist views seem to provide ready

¹⁰ See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936); Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale, 1944); and Gibbard, *op. cit.*

explanations of the datum. For example, suppose that my judging that capital punishment is wrong is, as Ayer would have it, a matter of my expressing my own negative emotions towards capital punishment. In that case, it is unsurprising that we find something extremely odd about the idea of my deferring to you about whether capital punishment is wrong.¹¹

Similarly, the *constructivist* would seem to be in a strong position to account for the datum. For the constructivist, like the noncognitivist, will insist that it is a deep confusion to suppose that there is some independent realm of moral facts or truths that we are attempting to bring into view and to which our moral judgments are answerable. For example, a Kantian constructivist might hold that, whenever we engage in pure moral deference, we are guilty of misconstruing the nature of the moral domain: we are in effect treating the moral domain as a repository of antecedently existing facts, as opposed to something that we must construct by the autonomous exercise of our own reason.¹²

On the other hand, the datum seems to pose at least a *prima facie* challenge for certain forms of cognitivism. After all, when it comes to deep and unobvious facts about the empirical world, we readily defer to others (in some cases scientists, in other cases explorers, and so on) who are better placed to discover those facts than we are. In such cases, even a very sweeping kind of deference to expert opinion seems appropriate. If, similarly, there is a domain of deep and unobvious moral facts, then it is natural to expect that some of us—intuitively, the “moral experts”—would be better placed to discover these facts than others. In principle then, moral deference should strike us as no more peculiar than deference about scientific matters or geography.¹³

¹¹ Cf. David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1988), p. 10. It is an interesting question, although not one that I will explore here, whether broadly noncognitivist views that seek to appropriate the realist's talk of moral truth and related notions retain this apparent virtue. See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford, 1993).

¹² For clear statements of the constructivist rejection of the idea that the aim of moral judgment is to depict antecedently existing moral facts, see, for example, Christine Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy,” in *The Constitution of Agency* (New York: Oxford, 2008), pp. 302–26; John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” reprinted in his *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1999), pp. 303–58; and Sharon Street, “What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?” *Philosophy Compass*, v, 5 (May 2010): 363–84.

¹³ Could the cognitivist claim that it is the *a priori* character of morality that explains our ambivalence towards the possibility of full-fledged moral expertise? According to this line of thought, if the most fundamental moral truths are knowable independently

Of course, there are domains in which a commitment to cognitivism coexists easily with the sense that there would be something very odd about deferring to another person. Consider, for example, domains in which the truth is readily available to anyone, or almost anyone. Thus, it would be odd to defer to someone else about simple claims of arithmetic, but this does not suggest that such claims are neither true nor false. Rather, the reason why deference about simple arithmetical truths seems out of place is the apparent lack of need for such deference. Could the moral cognitivist offer an explanation along these lines?

In fact, a venerable tradition in moral philosophy insists that everyone (or at least every nondefective adult human being) is in a position to know the essential truths of morality, independently of the assistance of others.¹⁴ Here, for example, is Thomas Reid:

From these self-evident first principles the whole system of moral conduct follows so easily, and with so little aid of reasoning, that every man of common understanding, who wishes to know his duty, may know it. The path of duty is a plain path, which the upright in heart can rarely mistake. Such it must be, since every man is bound to walk in it. There are some intricate cases in morals which admit of disputation; but these seldom occur in practice; and when they do, the learned disputant has no great advantage.... In order to know what is right and wrong in human conduct, we need only listen to the dictates of our conscience, when the mind is calm and unruffled, or attend to the judgment that we form of others in like circumstances.¹⁵

The general idea that the moral facts are in some sense available to everyone has also been endorsed by a number of contemporary

of experience, then morality will differ from empirical domains in the extent to which experience can render some better placed than others to discover those truths. But on the face of it this strategy seems unpromising: after all, we are certainly not wary about experts in the apparently *a priori* domain of mathematics. Believing Fermat's last theorem on the basis of deference to an expert mathematician seems on a par with believing the theory of special relativity on the basis of deference to the physicist. I discuss this issue more extensively in "The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference," in John Hawthorne, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives 23: Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2009), pp. 321–44.

¹⁴For references and further discussion of this tradition, see *ibid.* A main theme of J. B. Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge, 1988) is the extent to which the development of modern moral philosophy was driven by the desire for an account of morality that would make an awareness of its requirements universally available.

¹⁵Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*. First published 1788; excerpt reprinted in Schneewind, ed., *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), pp. 632–50, at p. 645.

philosophers, including Bernard Gert,¹⁶ Nicholas Rescher,¹⁷ and Michael Smith.¹⁸

Could the cognitivist appeal to the alleged universal availability of the truths of morality in order to account for the datum? Elsewhere, I have argued that this strategy founders on a dilemma.¹⁹ In brief, the dilemma runs as follows. Consider two different interpretations of the claim that the truths of morality are universally available. On the first interpretation, the truths of morality are, like the simplest truths of arithmetic, literally trivial: they are obvious or potentially obvious to anyone who is genuinely concerned to know them. If the truths of morality were universally available in this sense, then the cognitivist would be in a position to account for the datum in a satisfying way. However, such a characterization of our cognitive relationship to morality is implausibly optimistic. Notably, the diversity of opinion that we find with respect to many moral issues belies the idea that the truths of morality are obvious or even potentially obvious; *pace* Reid, genuine moral disagreement is neither an uncommon nor a marginal phenomenon. Moreover, there seems to be no good reason to deny that, among those who disagree about issues such as the morality of abortion or capital punishment, at least some on each side of the debate are people of good will who sincerely desire to know what morality requires. Even apart from interpersonal considerations, genuine moral uncertainty seems far more common than would be the case on the suggested picture.

Consider an alternative interpretation of the thought that the truths of morality are universally available. On this interpretation, even though some moral truths are unobvious, those truths are nonetheless in principle accessible to all normal adult human beings, in the following sense: none of us lacks the *wherewithal* to discern those truths, in a way that not all of us have the wherewithal to discern the truths of quantum electrodynamics or algebraic topology. On this

¹⁶ "Morality does not require beliefs that are not known to all moral agents." Gert, *Common Morality* (New York: Oxford, 2004), p. 90. Cf. p. 3, where Gert asserts that "this book...contains no new information about what kinds of actions morality prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages, or allows. Anyone who is intelligent enough to read this book already has all of this information."

¹⁷ "Anything that requires extensive knowledge or deep cogitation is *ipso facto* ruled out as a moral precept or principle. The very idea of moral expertise...is for this reason totally unrealistic." Rescher, *Commonsense* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette, 2005), p. 200.

¹⁸ "Our moral life seems to presuppose that [moral] facts are in principle available to all; that no one in particular is better placed to discover them than anyone else." Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), p. 5.

¹⁹ McGrath, *op. cit.* The discussion of the next three paragraphs draws on material from section III of that paper.

view, all normal adult human beings have a level of conceptual sophistication and general intelligence that is sufficient to autonomously grasp the truths of morality, provided that that intelligence and sophistication is properly employed. A proponent of this view might maintain that the bulk of moral disagreement is due to certain common biases, false nonmoral beliefs, and simple performance errors that distort our moral reasoning, and that our moral views would converge under suitably idealized conditions of reflection and deliberation.

This view about morality is at least somewhat more plausible than the view according to which morality consists of a body of trivialities. However, notice that even if it were true, it would not provide a good explanation of the datum. For it often makes perfect sense to defer to someone, even if one has the capacity or wherewithal to figure out the answer for oneself. For example, I might defer to my accountant with respect to the question of how much money I owe the government, even if I am perfectly capable of figuring out the answer on my own given sufficient attention to the task. In contrast to pure moral deference, this seems like a paradigmatic case in which deference to another person is completely straightforward and unproblematic. Hence, the dilemma for such "universalist" approaches to explaining the datum: the more a given view makes the moral facts obvious to all, the greater its ability to explain the datum, but the less plausible it is; on the other hand, the more a view allows for the unobviousness of moral facts by idealizing the sense in which those facts are universally available, the more plausible it becomes, but the less it is able to function as an explanation.

When the truth is obvious, deference seems out of place because it is otiose. At the other end of the spectrum, truths which none of us are in a position to know similarly generate contexts in which deference is out of the question, without thereby creating any presumption against a cognitivist interpretation of the relevant domain. Even if claims about the outcomes of future coin tosses and lotteries are true or false, we do not believe that there are experts about such matters, because we do not believe that anyone is in a position to know whether the claims are true. But again, an explanation along these lines does not seem to hold much promise in the moral case. For it is not only moral skeptics, those who deny that we are in a position to attain genuine moral knowledge, who find something odd about the idea of pure moral deference.

Consider next a more philosophically interesting domain in which a commitment to cognitivism coexists with a sense that deference to others is typically out of place: the domain of self-knowledge. It is a familiar idea that we enjoy a kind of privileged access to our own

mental states. Indeed, a historically popular claim is that one's present-tense beliefs about one's own mental states are incorrigible: according to this line of thought, if I believe that I am in pain on the basis of introspection, this belief is not subject to correction by others. Even if this incorrigibility thesis is too strong, we can certainly agree that, at the very least, it would be extremely odd for me to defer to someone else about whether I am in pain right now, or (more generally) to treat that person as possessing superior expertise about what mental states I am in. Yet this does not lead us to think that utterances about one's own mental states do not express propositions.²⁰ Thus, the domain of self-knowledge is one in which a commitment to cognitivism coexists easily with the sense that there would be something very odd about treating others as experts.²¹

How useful should the cognitivist find the example of self-knowledge? Some cognitivists might find the example extremely useful. Consider, for example, a toy subjectivist or individual relativist theory, according to which an utterance of the sentence, "Capital punishment is wrong," expresses the truth-evaluable proposition that the speaker disapproves of capital punishment. Notice that such a view readily explains the seeming oddity of pure moral deference. On the face of it, each particular agent is typically best placed to find out whether an utterance of "capital punishment is wrong" in his or her own mouth is true, because he or she is typically best placed to find out whether he or she disapproves of capital punishment at the time of the utterance. Indeed, on this view, the oddity of pure moral deference turns out to be a special case of the oddity of deferring to someone else about one's own mental states.

²⁰ Here I simply assume the orthodox view of the matter, while noting that it has been contested. Thus, according to a view sometimes associated with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), apparent self-ascriptions of pain are not actually in the business of stating facts; rather, in saying "I'm in pain," one is expressing one's pain, much as if one had said "Ouch!" instead. One of the reasons for the popularity this view once enjoyed seems to have been a commitment to (something like) the incorrigibility thesis, along with the thought that, if utterances of the relevant kind were in the business of stating facts, their incorrigibility would be inexplicable. This line of thought—that a nonfactualist construal of the relevant kind of discourse is the best explanation of its peculiar status—is parallel to the one at issue in this paper.

²¹ Of course, there are exceptional contexts in which a person might treat someone else as an expert about at least some of her mental states: for example, a person might very well defer to her therapist about whether she is actually in certain mental states (although presumably not whether she is currently experiencing physical pain). Notwithstanding such exceptional contexts, it is clear that deference about one's own mental states is a relatively marginal phenomenon compared to the kind of sweeping deference that we find in many other domains, and that a natural explanation of this is the fact that one is typically better positioned than others to make judgments of the relevant kind.

Thus, at least some possible cognitivist views accommodate the datum as readily as noncognitivism or constructivism. The same does not seem to be true, however, of moral realism. Providing a fully satisfactory characterization of moral realism is a subtle matter; for our purposes, we can make do with the following (admittedly rudimentary) gloss.²² First, the moral realist is a cognitivist, in that she holds that moral sentences express truth-evaluable propositions. But in contrast to the subjectivist or individual relativist, the realist holds that the moral facts are objective, in that the moral status of a practice such as capital punishment is independent of our moral opinions, or which moral framework we accept.²³ Moreover, although the moral realist will readily admit that at least some moral facts are unobvious, she is not a moral skeptic: she does not hold that our best efforts to achieve genuine moral knowledge are doomed to failure. Rather, the moral realist holds that although the discovery of some moral facts might be an intellectually demanding task, we are capable of attaining, and in fact possess, substantial moral knowledge.²⁴

²² For some of the subtleties, see Smith, "Moral Realism," in Hugh LaFollete, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 15–37; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (New York: Oxford, 2003), especially pp. 13–18; and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Moral Realism," in David Copp, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

²³ Thus, according to Shafer-Landau, "realism ... insists that the truth of any first-order normative standard is not a function of what anyone happens to think of it." Shafer-Landau, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Similarly, Richard Boyd characterizes realism partially in terms of whether the truth of a moral belief is independent of our moral opinions and theories in his "How to Be a Moral Realist," Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1988), p. 182. And J. L. Mackie, in characterizing what he takes to be the ordinary person's commitment to realism, claims that on this view, when a person makes a moral claim he says "something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example, a possible action, as it is in itself, or would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it." Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 33.

²⁴ In "Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What Is the Question?" Michaelis Michael and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, eds., *Philosophy in Mind: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Mind* (Boston: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 277–319, Gideon Rosen contends that we lack any satisfactory way of giving content to the (alleged) distinction between realism and anti-realism about a given domain. While he readily admits that there is a clear distinction between being a "minimal realist" (that is, someone who holds that "our core beliefs about the disputed subject matter are more or less true," p. 281) and being a non-cognitivist or error theorist, he is skeptical that there is some good way of further dividing the camp of minimal realists into realists and anti-realists in terms of mind-dependence, objectivity, and so on. It is possible that my "moral realist" is simply a minimal realist about morality in Rosen's sense, given the understanding that the different versions of subjectivism and relativism are excluded. In that case, the extension of "moral realist" as it used in this paper would be relatively inclusive. Still, the puzzle in question would not be *everyone's* problem: at least some noncognitivists, for example, would have an immediate and obvious solution to it.

Notice that the moral domain as the realist conceives of it seems to be exactly the kind of domain where one would expect to find different levels of expertise among different individuals.²⁵ On the realist's view, there are moral facts, which a given individual might either know or not know. In general, these moral facts are neither trivial nor completely unknowable. Further, the objective character that moral facts are alleged to have undermines the possibility that each individual is his or her own best moral authority, as would be the case if some variety of subjectivism or individual relativism were true. In these respects, then, the moral domain as the realist understands it seems to be one in which some individuals would count as experts relative to others. We thus might expect to find pure moral deference as straightforward a practice as deference anywhere else. The fact that we do not find this is at least initially surprising, given a realist view. In short, the datum seems to cast at least some *prima facie* doubt on the general picture of morality that the realist presents.

How should the realist reply? Let us consider some possibilities.

III. DOES MORAL KNOWLEDGE REQUIRE MORAL UNDERSTANDING?

Suppose that Andrew and Benjamin are mid-nineteenth-century abolitionists who are both passionately opposed to slavery. However, while Benjamin's opposition is based on his own sensitivity to the reasons why slavery is wrong, Andrew's opposition is based solely on the testimony of someone whom he takes to be a reliable moral authority. What account might the realist offer for the sense that there is something extremely odd about Andrew's stance with respect to slavery compared to Benjamin's?

According to one class of answers that the realist might offer, the difference resides in the inferior epistemic status of Andrew's belief that slavery is wrong. For example, the realist might suggest that one can only *know* that slavery is wrong if one's belief is at some level based on those considerations in virtue of which slavery is wrong: in order to genuinely know that slavery is wrong, one must have at least some appreciation of the reasons why it is. More generally, the realist might suggest that *moral knowledge requires moral understanding*. Notice that, in general, when one holds a true belief solely on the basis of another's testimony, one does not believe the relevant proposition on the basis of those considerations that underwrite its truth: if I believe that *p* is true solely on

²⁵ Cf. David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge, 1989), p. 95. Brink briefly considers the possibility that someone might reject moral realism on the grounds that it has "the implausible implication that there are moral experts or authorities"; in response, he offers a qualified defense of moral expertise, and thus attempts to turn the point to the moral realist's advantage (pp. 95–98).

the basis of your say-so, I typically do not understand why p is true. Thus, pure moral deference does not deliver moral understanding. If moral understanding is required for moral knowledge, pure moral deference is not a possible source of moral knowledge: while Benjamin's belief is a genuine candidate for knowledge, Andrew's belief is not.

Consider the analogous view about mathematics. Notably, both Roderick Chisholm²⁶ and Bernard Williams²⁷ have defended the view that one cannot have full-fledged mathematical knowledge on the basis of another's testimony. Someone who believes that a given mathematical proposition is true on the basis of grasping a proof of it has genuine mathematical knowledge in a way that someone who believes the same proposition on the basis of testimony does not. In the mathematical case, there is a particularly intimate relationship between the relevant mathematical truth and a canonical proof of it. Similarly, there seems to be a particularly intimate relationship between the fact that slavery is wrong and those features of slavery in virtue of which it counts as wrong. By contrast, whatever justification is afforded by testimony in the two cases seems extremely extrinsic to the truth of the proposition in question. According to the current proposal, the acquisition of genuine moral knowledge requires one to engage in moral deliberation, or at least in rational processes that, even if more rudimentary than deliberation, nevertheless resemble it in that they too involve sensitivity to those considerations that underwrite the truth of the relevant proposition. On this view, our attitude about moral deference stems from our perhaps tacit recognition that such deference is not a genuine source of moral knowledge.

However, on balance this proposal is not an attractive option for the moral realist. First, notice that, at least outside of the moral domain, one often knows that p is the case even if one has no understanding as to why p is the case. (One can know, even know with certainty, that drinking saltwater causes dehydration, even if one has no idea why drinking saltwater causes dehydration.) Indeed, situations with this structure often set the agenda for substantive inquiry in the sciences and elsewhere. In general, it is simply not true that one's reasons for believing p must be among the reasons why p is true in order for one's belief to count as knowledge. That is why testimony can deliver knowledge of empirical matters even in the absence of

²⁶ Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966).

²⁷ Williams, "Knowledge and Reasons," in G. H. von Wright, ed., *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge* (The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 1–11. Ayer also seems to implicitly accept the view in his "Comments on Williams," at pages 12–16 of the same volume. For criticism, see especially Coady, "Mathematical Knowledge and Reliable Authority," *op. cit.*, pp. 249–61.

any explanation as to why things are as the testifier describes them. Why then should morality be different? Perhaps some reason might be offered for thinking that moral knowledge differs from empirical knowledge in this respect. But in any case, it is important to see that any such reason should not have much appeal for the *realist*. For the realist, that a particular token action has the property of being wrong is an objective fact about it. If one knew that someone else was a reliable detector of that property, then surely one could gain knowledge that the action possessed the property on the basis of her testimony, just as one could gain knowledge that some difficult to detect natural property is instantiated in such-and-such circumstances from the reliable testimony of a natural scientist.

Thus, the realist should reject this strategy: she should allow that pure moral deference can deliver moral knowledge, even though it does not typically deliver moral understanding. More generally, the realist should reject the idea that the difference between Andrew and Benjamin resides in the epistemic status of their respective beliefs.²⁸

A similar point holds for more radical proposals, for example, that a moral view cannot be fully understood if it is held on the basis of another's testimony. This is the view of Philip Nickel:

This is why many beliefs gained from moral dependence are deficient: such claims, if relied on without independent justification, are not fully understood.²⁹

Elsewhere, Nickel suggests that full understanding requires "a sensitivity to justification conditions" and that this is what moral testimony often fails to deliver.³⁰ As an example of a moral claim that is not fully understood when it is believed on the basis of testimony, he offers

²⁸ Nor should the realist say that the datum is explained by the fact that moral knowledge based on understanding is epistemically *better* knowledge than moral knowledge where such understanding is lacking. To the extent that there are ways in which moral knowledge plus understanding is better than moral knowledge alone, the same seems true of nonmoral domains.

The suggestion that moral knowledge requires moral understanding is also criticized by Alison Hills, "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology," *Ethics*, cxx, 1 (October 2009): 94–127.

²⁹ Nickel, *op. cit.*, pp. 260–61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259. Notice that there seem to be two ideas in play here: (i) in order to fully understand a moral claim one must actually possess some independent justification for that claim, and (ii) in order to fully understand a moral claim one must be sensitive to its justification conditions; that is, one must possess the ability to recognize a justification for the claim, if such a justification were encountered. The second requirement is significantly weaker than the first. But the point made in the main text holds against either interpretation. Nickel's ultimate conclusion is that *actions* undertaken in response to moral testimony cannot be "morally good." For discussion of proposals of this general sort, see section v below.

"Socrates should have fled prison." On the face of it, the suggestion that anyone who holds this belief on the basis of testimony must fail to fully understand it is an implausible one. But whatever arguments might be offered on its behalf, the *realist* should reject the relevant picture of understanding out of hand. In general, the idea that one can understand a claim only if one independently grasps its justification conditions is a characteristic thesis of anti-realism; indeed, disagreement on this point is sometimes seen as definitive of the dispute between realist and anti-realist.³¹ Thus, the realist should reject this picture of what is required for understanding a moral claim, on pain of compromising his realism beyond recognition.

IV. RECOGNIZING MORAL EXPERTS

Let us turn to an alternative realist strategy, according to which moral deference is, at least in principle, no more problematic than deference in any other domain. On this view, the datum is explained by the fact that, in practice, formidable epistemological difficulties arise when one attempts to identify genuine moral experts as such. Our sense that there is something odd about pure moral deference is an artifact of our (perhaps implicit) recognition that, in the moral case, one typically lacks the kinds of compelling grounds for attributing genuine expertise that one often possesses in other domains.³²

More specifically, notice that it is often easier to acquire clear, unequivocal evidence that someone possesses reliable judgment in various empirical domains than it is to acquire evidence that someone possesses reliable judgment in the moral domain. Consider, for example, weather forecasting. Even if one knows nothing about weather-forecasting techniques and is wholly ignorant of meteorology, it is a relatively straightforward matter to collect evidence that bears directly on the reliability of rival weather forecasters. When I observe that it is raining today, I acquire a piece of evidence that speaks in favor of the reliability of those forecasters who predicted rain and against the reliability of those who failed to do so. In this way, I can amass clear track-record evidence relevant to the question of who possesses genuine weather-forecasting expertise.

³¹ See, for example, Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991).

³² The idea that there are deep difficulties in identifying genuine moral experts as such (even on the assumption that such experts exist) is an ancient one; it is clearly present in Plato's early dialogues. For useful discussion, see Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: California UP), especially pp. 78–82, and "Socratic Intellectualism," reprinted in his *Virtues of Authenticity* (Princeton: University Press, 1999).

When one observes that it is raining, one in effect has independent access, via perception, to facts in the target domain. In arriving at the view that a given weather forecaster correctly predicted rain, one does not rely on techniques similar to those employed in arriving at that prediction. Because one is in a position to determine reliably which weather forecasters got it right on particular occasions by some method other than those employed by the weather forecasters themselves, one has a means of calibrating their techniques for accuracy. In a similar way, a scientist might calibrate a new instrument for accuracy by checking the reliability of its verdicts about some range of facts to which he has independent access.³³ By contrast, there seems to be no analogous way to calibrate the accuracy or reliability of someone's moral judgment, because one lacks the relevant kind of independent access to the moral facts. If one attempted to rank others with respect to the accuracy of their moral judgment by checking how often they answered controversial moral questions correctly, it seems as though one could do so only by engaging in first-order moral reasoning and deliberation of one's own. It is thus unsurprising that clear and unequivocal evidence that someone possesses unusually reliable moral judgment is hard to come by. Even if there are genuine moral experts, locating particular individuals within the space of moral expertise is undoubtedly a precarious business.³⁴

Of course, insofar as one holds opinions about disputed moral questions, one will also hold that some individuals have more reliable moral judgment than others, on the basis of their having arrived at (what one takes to be) the correct answers to those questions. But there is an important disanalogy between the weather-forecasting case and the moral case. The disanalogy is not that one's assessment of who possesses reliable moral judgment depends on one's own first-order moral views. That much is true, but it does not distinguish the two cases: by the same token, one's beliefs about who is a reliable weather forecaster are not independent of one's own first-order beliefs about the weather. (If one did not believe that it is raining today, one would not count this fact as being to the credit of those weather forecasters who predicted rain and to the discredit of those who failed to do so.) Rather, the difference seems to be that we lack independent access to

³³ For discussions of calibration in science and elsewhere, see Robert Cummins, "Reflections on Reflective Equilibrium," in Michael DePaul and William Ramsey, eds., *Rethinking Intuition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp. 113–28; and Allan Franklin, "Calibration," *Perspectives on Science*, v, 2 (Summer 1997): 31–80.

³⁴ For further discussion of this point, see my "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise," in Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford, 2008), pp. 87–108.

the moral facts, and so cannot accumulate track-record evidence by independent means. Our situation in the moral realm is analogous, perhaps, to the situation we would be in with respect to weather forecasting if we did not have perceptual access to facts about the weather, but instead had to rely on weather-forecasting techniques in order to gauge the accuracy of (other) weather-forecasting techniques.

Of course, even if I rely exclusively on my own moral judgment in assessing the reliability of others, this does not preclude the possibility that I will conclude that someone else's moral judgment is superior to my own. Suppose, for example, that when you and I disagree, I more often than not come around to your point of view: after further reflection or experience, I typically come to the conclusion that you were correct after all. In this way, I might arrive at the view that your moral judgment is more reliable than my own and resolve to defer to you in cases of future conflict. Still, if this is the kind of route by which one comes to attribute superior moral judgment to someone else, then it is unsurprising that deference in the moral realm seems to be a relatively marginal phenomenon compared to the kind of sweeping deference that we find in many other domains.

In this respect, our attitude toward moral deference seems somewhat similar to our attitude toward deference about philosophy, generally. Here too we have impure cases, in which deference seems relatively straightforward. Consider a case in which you would unhesitatingly defer to a colleague's opinion about some abstruse metaphysical question: you have a generally high regard for her philosophical judgment, she works in the subfield and you do not, and she assures you that the existing arguments in the literature really do favor such-and-such a conclusion. Still, deference about metaphysics, like deference about morality, seems more marginal than deference in many other domains. What could account for this? It is not implausible to suppose that at least part of the explanation is our lack of strong, independent evidence as to which metaphysicians possess reliable judgment. Of course, one might recognize that a particular metaphysician possesses a high degree of philosophical ingenuity and sophistication and, to the extent that one takes such virtues to be positively correlated with reliability about metaphysics, one will take this as some evidence that the individual is reliable. Even on the most optimistic assumptions, however, the possession of such virtues would seem to be relatively weak evidence of reliability compared to the kind of straightforward track-record evidence available in many other domains.³⁵ Perhaps, then, the explanation for

³⁵ On this point, consider the kinds of disagreement that we find among rival metaphysicians whose philosophical ingenuity and sophistication is not disputed.

why deference about philosophical truth is relatively marginal has to do with our lack of evidence as to who among the philosophers deserves it.

The realist might suggest that a parallel explanation holds in the moral domain. She might claim that the best explanation of the datum is not that there are no moral facts, and therefore, no moral experts. Rather, our relative wariness about moral deference is an artifact of the formidable practical obstacles that arise when we attempt to identify or recognize genuine moral experts as such, obstacles that are not present (or present to a significantly lesser degree) in many other domains.

What should we make of this reply? While it seems a clear improvement over the previously considered proposals, there is reason to think that it does not provide a sufficiently deep explanation of the datum. According to the current proposal, there is nothing peculiar about pure moral deference *per se*. Rather, the apparent peculiarity of such deference is an artifact of our epistemic limitations: in the moral realm, we are often simply not in a position to know who deserves deference. The theory predicts that, as our confidence that someone is a genuine moral expert increases, our sense that there is something odd about simply “farming out” our moral beliefs to that person should diminish accordingly. At the limit, we should find the thought of judging that capital punishment is wrong on the basis of someone else’s say-so no odder than deferring to him about driving directions. But it is doubtful that our sense that there is something peculiar about pure moral deference would vanish entirely in this way.

To see this, imagine a juror at a criminal trial. The defense calls an impeccably credentialed expert witness who confidently testifies that the accused is insane; the juror thus comes to believe accordingly. But then the prosecution calls its equally well-credentialed expert witness, who with equal confidence testifies to the sanity of the accused. In response, the juror loses his confidence in his earlier belief. He would gladly and without hesitation farm out his opinion concerning the sanity of the accused to one of the experts if only he knew which one deserved his deference in this particular case.³⁶ According to the current proposal, our sense that there is something peculiar about pure moral deference derives from our implicit recognition that, with respect to morality, human beings generally occupy more or less the same position as the juror. But on reflection, this assimilation seems quite implausible. In particular, our sense that there is something peculiar about moral deference does

³⁶ For an interesting discussion of the juror’s epistemic plight, see Alvin Goldman, “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Lxiii, 1 (July 2001): 85–110.

not seem as contingent as this picture suggests it should be. In contrast, the noncognitivist does have a relatively deep explanation of the datum to offer: on his view, the peculiarity of farming out one's opinions as to the moral facts is due to the nonexistence of such facts.

This objection may not be decisive; in any case, much more could be said. Rather than pursuing this line of thought further, however, I want to turn to a different line of response which the realist might offer, a response which does seem to possess the relevant depth.

V. MORAL DEFERENCE AND AGENCY

Anscombe contends that moral and mathematical teaching are alike in that the primary goal in each case is that the student will learn to *do* something correctly. She argues that, unlike simply believing what one is told to believe, acting correctly requires interpretation:

There is such a thing as believing what one is told without reflection, consideration or interpretation; doing what one is told is an interpretation and so with doing, however obedient one is, one can hardly escape being one's own pilot... there comes a point where [one] must act and that is the end of listening to advice. But with believing it is otherwise; a man may decline to be his own pilot for certain of his beliefs and altogether rely on authority, without doing anything on his own account to digest and assimilate the beliefs. This would be possible in moral matters only to the extent that his beliefs were idle, without consequences, that is, if they concerned matters that [one] never had to deal with.³⁷

Suppose that a child believes the proposition that lying is wrong simply in virtue of deferring to a parent; the child thus lacks any understanding of, or sensitivity to, those features of lying in virtue of which it is wrong. For the reasons given in section III, the realist should admit that, as long as the parent genuinely knows that lying is wrong and the child has no reason to distrust the parent, nothing precludes the child's belief from qualifying as knowledge. Indeed, in the absence of some skeptical view about testimony, it seems that there is no positive epistemic status that the child's belief must lack in virtue of its source. Nevertheless, it is clear that the child's lack of understanding is likely to compromise her ability to apply the relevant piece of knowledge correctly. There are a number of ways in which this is so. First, even if lying is generally wrong, there are, plausibly, exceptional circumstances in which it is not. Assuming that there are some cases in which it is not wrong to lie, one's ability to recognize them as such is presumably not independent of one's understanding why lying is wrong in those cases in which it is. We would thus expect the child to

³⁷ Anscombe, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

be insensitive to the kinds of considerations that can outweigh or silence reasons against lying in particular contexts. Moreover, if the ability to recognize a possible action as a lie is not wholly independent of sensitivity to those features in virtue of which lies are typically wrong, then this is another respect in which a child whose knowledge is a matter of deference will be ill equipped to apply her knowledge correctly.

Thus, the realist might follow Anscombe and attempt to accommodate the datum by appealing to the apparent gap between moral knowledge-that and moral knowledge-how. When it comes to morality, the realist might say, understanding why *p* is true (as opposed to merely knowing that *p* is true) puts one in a far better position to apply one's knowledge in particular cases.³⁸ On this view, an agent whose knowledge depends on pure moral deference resembles the culinary novice who blindly follows the instructions provided by the expert chef. Although the novice might commit the recipe to memory and thus have propositional knowledge of what he or she ought to do at each stage of the process, we should not be surprised if the novice's execution of the task falls short of the expert's. According to this line of thought, our attitude toward moral deference has its roots in our recognition that morality is largely a matter of knowing how, while moral deference typically delivers (at best) knowledge that.³⁹

One limitation of this proposal is that it seems to lack the requisite generality: it does not explain the peculiarity of deference with respect to moral beliefs about what to do in particular cases. In the essay from which the above quotation is drawn, Anscombe's concern is with moral teaching, which presumably involves the transmission of moral *dicta* that have a certain degree of generality or abstractness (as opposed to specific injunctions about what to do on particular occasions). Indeed, the line of thought suggested by Anscombe seems most compelling in cases in which there is a substantive gap between what one is told and the concrete circumstances in which one must act: this creates the need for interpretation, and hence, understanding—something which pure moral deference typically does not deliver. But imagine an individual who genuinely comes to believe that *it would be wrong for me to eat this piece of red meat on my plate* in response to having

³⁸ Cf. Nickel, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

³⁹ The seminal modern discussion of the general distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that, as well as the classic arguments for the irreducibility of the former to the latter, are due to Anscombe's Oxford colleague Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University Press, 1949). For recent criticism of the irreducibility claim, see Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, "Knowing How," *this JOURNAL*, xcvi, 8 (August 2001): 411–44. For more on the distinction in connection with moral testimony, see the brief discussion in Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 618–20.

been told as much by one of his dinner companions. Here the need for interpretation seems minimal—it is not as though the individual is in the position of having to apply some general principle. Nevertheless, deference in this case seems no less peculiar on that account.⁴⁰ Thus, it does not seem as though the explanation on offer can be the full story.

Still, the idea that the realist might appeal to the intimate link between moral judgment and action seems promising. Consider a somewhat different way of developing it. Again, when one believes that Φ -ing is the right thing to do on the basis of pure moral deference, one typically does not understand why Φ -ing is the right thing to do. (If one did come to see or understand why Φ -ing is the right thing to do, then one's belief would no longer be a matter of pure moral deference.) In section III, we rejected the suggestion that one's failing to grasp the reasons why Φ -ing is the right thing to do would preclude one's knowing that Φ -ing is the right thing to do, or otherwise detract from the status of one's belief. Another possibility, however, is this: if an agent Φ 's because of her belief that Φ -ing is the right thing to do, but she does not understand why Φ -ing is the right thing to do, this detracts from the status of her *action*.

Like the proposal just considered, this proposal seeks to accommodate the datum in a way that is congenial to the realist by appeal to the intimate connection between moral judgment and action. But unlike that proposal, the emphasis here is not on the possibility that a lack of understanding will lead one to misapply general moral principles or relatively abstract pieces of moral knowledge when one acts. Rather, the thought is that even when one does what is in fact the right thing to do, acting in the absence of an understanding of why that action was the right thing to do detracts in some (yet to be specified) way from the value of one's action. Of course, the two proposals need not be viewed as competitors, but as supplementing or complementing one another. That is, one might hold that an agent who possesses moral knowledge in the absence of understanding is not only likely to misapply that knowledge in particular cases (and so do the wrong thing), but also such that his morally right actions are less valuable than they otherwise would be.

But what is the respect in which such actions are deficient? Nickel contends that such actions cannot be morally good.⁴¹ His own argu-

⁴⁰ Notice that insofar as we can make sense of a case like this, it is natural to picture the story as involving impure moral deference: the individual takes his dinner companion to have a relevantly similar moral sensibility but to possess some background information about the processes by which the meal was produced, and so on.

⁴¹ Nickel, *op. cit.*

ment for this conclusion depends on his view, noted above, that in order to fully understand a moral claim, one must possess an independent justification for thinking it is true, or at least have a grasp on its justification conditions.⁴² In section III, we noted that the realist will reject any such picture of understanding on pain of compromising his realism. Once this picture has been set aside, is there any reason for thinking that actions of the relevant kind are *morally* deficient?

Consider two cases: in each case, the agent genuinely knows that Φ -ing is the right thing to do and responds to this knowledge by Φ -ing. The difference is that in the first case, the knowledge which gives rise to the action is a matter of the agent's having been informed by a reliable moral authority that Φ -ing is the right thing to do in the relevant circumstances, while in the second case the knowledge is based on the agent's own sensitivity to those features of her circumstances which make Φ -ing the right thing to do. In some morally significant respects, the actions seem to be on a par: they will, for example, have the same consequences. But in other morally significant respects they may differ. After all, ordinary moral thought, as well as much moral theory, maintains that it matters a great deal why an agent performs a given action. Perhaps most obviously, there seems to be a morally significant difference between, for example, the shopkeeper who gives his customers the correct change because he is genuinely honest and the shopkeeper who does so solely because it is the most efficient way to maintain an advantageous reputation for honesty.⁴³ Notice that insofar as pure moral deference does not deliver understanding, pure moral deference does not put one in a position to do the right thing for the right reasons even in those cases in which it delivers genuine moral knowledge. If the child refrains from lying on a given occasion because he knows that lying is wrong but has no grasp on why it is, then his refraining from lying on that occasion is not based on the reasons that there are not to lie.

Thus, we should distinguish between three different agents: (i) the agent who does the right thing for the wrong reasons (for example, the ultimately self-interested shopkeeper), (ii) the agent who does the right thing because it is right, and (iii) the agent who does the right thing for the reasons which make it right. The agent who knows that Φ -ing is the right thing to do on the basis of pure moral deference is in a position to do the right thing because it is right, but he is not in a position to do the right thing for the underlying reasons which make

⁴² On the exegetical issue, see note 30 above.

⁴³ The example, of course, is from Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981 [1785]).

it right. To the extent that we attach a greater value to the latter, we have reason to be dissatisfied with pure moral deference, even in those cases in which it delivers genuine moral knowledge.⁴⁴

In attempting to accommodate the datum in this way, the realist appeals to a broadly Aristotelian conception of right or virtuous action. In *Nichomachean Ethics* II.4, Aristotle poses a puzzle for his own account of moral development.⁴⁵ According to that account, one must perform just actions in order to become a just person. However, it seems as though someone who performs just actions is *already* a just person, in the way that someone who successfully produces the kind of thing at which a given craft aims is already a craftsman of the relevant kind. In response to this puzzle, Aristotle offers two replies, each of which is suggestive in the present context. First, he distinguishes between conformity and understanding: even with respect to the crafts, one might produce the very kind of thing at which the craftsman aims without yet being a craftsman oneself. This would be the case, for example, if one was simply following the instructions of someone else, as opposed to acting on one's own understanding. Moreover, Aristotle holds that there is a crucial disanalogy between the products of a craft and virtuous action. With respect to the products of a craft, it is enough that they are in the right state once they have been produced (even if they came to be in that state by chance, or at the hand of someone who was blindly following the instructions of another person). In assessing the quality of what has been produced, no further question needs to be asked about the state of the person who produced it. However, things are otherwise with respect to just

⁴⁴ Cf. Hills on the conditions for "morally worthy action," *op. cit.*, pp. 113–17.

Might the attractiveness of this realist response depend in part on subtle issues about what provides us with reasons for action? Consider, for example, Thomas Scanlon's "buck-passing" account of goodness, as defended in his *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998). According to this account, to describe an action as good is not to attribute some additional, reason-providing property to it. Rather, to describe an action as good is to attribute to it the higher-order property of possessing some lower-order property or properties that provide reasons to perform it. Thus, if a given action is good because it is a kind action, it is not, strictly speaking, the fact that the action is good which counts as a reason to perform it; rather, it is the fact that it is kind which gives one such a reason. Scanlon contrasts the buck-passing account with a view about reasons for action that he attributes to G. E. Moore. According to that view, it is not the fact that the action is kind that gives one a reason to perform it, but rather the fact that the action has the property of being good. So perhaps the current proposal would hold more appeal for those realists who accept a theory of reasons such as Scanlon's, as opposed to the Moorean alternative: on the Moorean view, but not on Scanlon's view, an agent who knows only that a given action would be morally good is in a position to act on those reasons which speak in favor of the action.

⁴⁵ In this paragraph, I have relied on Terence Irwin's translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985).

actions: in order for a “just action to be done justly” it is crucial that the agent himself acts in a certain state, a state that (among other things) requires understanding.

Notice that a realist who pursues this strategy is not committed to the view that an agent who does the right thing because it is right fails to be morally praiseworthy. While an agent who does the right thing for the wrong reason would seem to be an inappropriate object of praise, there are many cases in which an agent who does the right thing because it is right would seem to deserve praise, even if he acts in ignorance of the reasons which make that action the right thing to do. (Consider especially cases in which the agent incurs considerable and foreseeable costs by performing the action.) It is not, after all, as though such an agent displays a lack of concern for morality. On the contrary, it is his very concern for morality that motivates him to act as he does.⁴⁶ The point is rather that, even granting that such an agent might very well deserve moral praise, he or she still falls short of an important ideal associated with moral agency: that of doing the right thing for the reasons that make it right. Thus, the realist might seek to accommodate the datum by claiming that our relative aversion to moral deference is due to our recognizing that someone who relies on moral deference for her moral views will inevitably fall short of this ideal. By contrast, when a person defers about some empirical matter, her doing so does not similarly frustrate the achievement of any ideal associated with agency. Thus, deference about the weather, geography, or some esoteric scientific matter strikes us as unproblematic in a way that moral deference does not.

What should we make of this proposal? I believe that it is the most promising of the strategies that we have considered. Nevertheless, it too faces challenges. While a full development and defense of it is beyond the scope of this paper, I will close by presenting two of the more pressing challenges and gesturing at how a realist might respond.⁴⁷

The first objection is that, in providing an agency-based explanation of the datum, the proposal overestimates the extent to which our moral judgments are tied to action. As is often noted, we seem to make moral

⁴⁶ Perhaps there is a respect in which the ignorant agent who does the right thing because it is right is less open to criticism (and potentially, more deserving of praise) than the agent who does the right thing because it is right even though he knows why it is right. The latter agent, unlike the former, is in a position to do the right thing for the reasons that make it right but fails to be moved by those reasons, falling back instead on the fact that the action is right. The latter agent thus seems a more natural target for the charge that he is “fetishizing” morality in an objectionable way. On “moral fetishism,” see Smith, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ For further development and defense, see my *Knowledge in the Moral Domain* (manuscript).

judgments that lack any practical import. For example, we might judge that some ancient practice was morally barbaric, even though that practice is not a live option for us, and even though the fact that it is not a live option for us does not depend on moral considerations (that is, even if we changed our minds about its moral status, there is no possibility that we would engage in it or any similar practice). On the face of it, the current proposal would seem to predict that pure moral deference about such matters should strike us as unproblematic, or at the very least, significantly less problematic than deference about matters of potentially practical significance. But it simply does not seem as though this is so. Offhand, my deferring to you about the moral status of abortion seems no less and no more peculiar than my deferring to you about the moral status of some long-abandoned ancient ritual.

A second objection proceeds from the apparent possibility of an agent's deferring to another person not only about the claim that a particular course of action is right, but also about the underlying reasons that make it right. For example, it seems that in principle I could learn from you not only that a given action is the right thing to do, but also that that action is the right thing to do because it is a kind action. It appears, then, that I could go on to perform the action for the reasons that make it right even though I have deferred to you about what those reasons are. Insofar as there seems to be something peculiar about my deferring to you in this way, this apparently cannot be explained by the claim that such deference frustrates the ideal of doing the right thing for the reasons that make it right.

How might the realist sympathetic to the proposal respond to these objections? A natural strategy for overcoming the first objection might involve attempting to show that our attitude toward moral deference in cases in which nothing practical is at stake derives from our attitude toward such deference in other, allegedly more fundamental cases. In response to the second objection, the realist might argue that an agent can know that a given action is the right thing to do, and even know that it is the right thing to do because it has such-and-such features, yet still not be in a position to perform the action on the basis of the relevant reasons. More precisely, the realist might argue that in order to act on the basis of the reasons which make the action the right thing to do, the agent must appreciate those reasons as reasons and not merely possess propositional knowledge that they require the action. Compare: one might know both that some mathematical claim is true and that some collection of propositions makes up a canonical proof of it, but not yet see the collection of propositions as a proof of the claim. This might be the situation of a student of mathematics whose knowledge is a matter of pure deference to her teacher. In that

case, the student is not yet in a position to believe the claim on the basis of the proof in the way that the teacher is. Similarly, the realist might say, an agent who is dependent on pure moral deference for her knowledge that an action has certain right-making features is typically not in a position to perform the action on the basis of those reasons, in the way that someone who genuinely grasps the connection between the two is.

It remains to be seen whether the current proposal is ultimately defensible against these and other objections; perhaps it could provide a satisfying response to the puzzle if spelled out in full detail. Alternatively, perhaps some other realist strategy might be vindicated. In the absence of some such vindication, however, the fundamental puzzle for the realist must be regarded as unsolved.

SARAH MCGRATH

Princeton University