Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
Vol. LXXIV No. 3, May 2007

What is Wrong With Moral Testimony?

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Is it legitimate to acquire one's moral beliefs on the testimony of others? The *pessimist* about moral testimony says not. But what is the source of the difficulty? Here pessimists have a choice. On the *Unavailability* view, moral testimony never makes knowledge available to the recipient. On *Unusability* accounts, although moral testimony can make knowledge available, some further norm renders it illegitimate to make use of the knowledge thus offered. I suggest that Unusability accounts provide the strongest form of pessimist view. I consider and reject five Unavailability accounts. I then argue that any such view will fail. But what is the norm rendering moral testimonial knowledge unusable? I suggest it lies in the requirement that we grasp for ourselves the moral reasons behind a moral view. This demand is one testimony cannot meet, and that claim holds whatever account we offer of the epistemology of testimony. However, while appeal to this requirement forms the most plausible pessimist view, it is another question whether pessimism is correct.

Introduction

Recent philosophy has paid considerable attention to the topic of testimony. It is widely accepted that a good deal of what we believe, we believe on the say-so of others; and various accounts have been proposed of the legitimacy of acquiring beliefs in this way, i.e., of how this process yields knowledge. However, relatively little has been said about whether testimony can be a legitimate source of moral belief. This neglect is surprising, from the point of view of both moral thinking and moral epistemology. Given the importance of moral issues, we ought to take care in forming views on them. It is clearly possible for the opinions of others to affect our moral outlook. If testimony is not a legitimate source of moral belief, we should strive to resist this influence. We should be open to being persuaded by others, responsive to moral argument; but we should not take their word on moral issues, not allow ourselves to be influenced by the fact that they hold a certain view. If, on the other hand, reliance on moral testimony is legitimate, there will still be questions about the conditions under which it is so.

Either way, our practice of forming moral belief might benefit from an account of moral testimony. Likewise for moral epistemology. The difficulties in describing the sources of moral knowledge are well known. If testimony is a possible source of such knowledge, it is one we might hope to understand, at least to the extent that we fathom the epistemology of testimony in general. Of course, testimony does not create knowledge, it passes it on. Testimonial moral knowledge must ultimately have some other source. Thus not all the problems of moral epistemology could be solved in this way. But understanding one source of moral knowledge is better than understanding none, especially if it could legitimately furnish a significant part of our moral thinking.

Is reliance on testimony legitimate in moral matters? Is it permissible to adopt a moral view in key part because someone else claims that things are morally thus and so? Unfortunately, intuitions divide. Some are powerfully inclined to deny that in moral questions reliance on others' claims is legitimate. We can take another's word on many matters—on, say, some question of chemistry, or on the direction of my hotel, or the best investment to make with my windfall—but not when the question is moral. This is one area where we have to work things out for ourselves. We all possess a moral conscience, and its exercise is not merely a right, but a duty.[1] Others cannot see the difficulty. Surely some see the moral contours more clearly than others: why should they not pass on their insights by telling how things stand? Our own children are the most obvious examples of those who might benefit in this way. But adults too may do so, at least if their advisors are the sage, the Pope or perhaps God himself. And how do such informants differ in more than degree from those around us everyday? Moreover, how *could* morality be resistant to testimony? If something can be known, it can be passed on to another by testimony. We might find this principle plausible at least as a starting point, but if so, the case for morality's incompatibility with testimony needs to be made.[2]

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1 Robert Paul Wolff, 'The Conflict Between Authority and Autonomy', *Authority*, ed. J. Raz, Blackwell 1990 (originally from Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchy*, Harper & Row, 1970) pp. 20-31; Clark A. Kucheman, 'Moral Duty and God: a View from the Left', *Religion & Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, London: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 81-103. The guiding figure of all such thinking is Kant.

2 Cf. E. D. Watts *Authority*, London: Croon Helm, 1982, ch. 6, esp. p. 55. Others sympathetic to moral testimony include G. E. M. Anscombe ('Authority in Morals', *Collected Papers vol. III: Ethics, Religion and Politic*s), pp. 43-50; W. H. Walsh ('Moral Authority & Moral Choice', *Proc. Arist. Soc.* LXV (1964-5), pp. 1-24); C. A. J. Coady (*Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, esp. pp. 69-75); and Karen Jones ('Second-Hand Moral Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCVI, no. 2, 1999, pp. 55-78).

I will call *pessimists* those who deny the legitimacy of relying on another's word in moral matters, and *optimists* those who accept it. We should be careful not to overdraw the dispute between them. The optimist does not think we can always take another's moral testimony. Gullibility is as much a vice in moral matters as elsewhere. Our would-be informants might be mistaken, or intend to mislead us, and we must guard against these and other infelicities. Rather, the optimist's point is that there is no difference in kind between moral and non-moral matters when it comes to taking testimony. Although things can go wrong in the moral as in the non-moral case, they can also go right; and when they do, testimony is a legitimate source of moral belief. It is this the pessimist rejects. However, it is hard for him to insist that taking moral testimony is never legitimate. Ought implies can. Sometimes subjects are not able either to settle moral questions for themselves or to remain agnostic. The most obvious example is those in need of moral education.[3] We are not born fully functioning moral thinkers. Quite what we need to become so is moot, but the process will surely involve accepting some moral claims on the authority of others. We could not develop a moral outlook without such reliance. Nor could we manage without developing a moral outlook at all. That would leave us excluded, in key part, from the company of our fellows, and thereby from a developed human life. No reasonable pessimist could think that a price worth paying for avoiding heteronomy in moral thinking. So at least some reliance on moral testimony has to be acceptable. However, it is so only where neither self-determination nor agnosticism are possible. In all other cases, we must resist taking moral opinions on trust. It is unclear quite how wide a range of exceptions the pessimist thereby concedes. What is clear is that his disagreement with the optimist survives this concession. In general we take testimony in cases in which we might have settled the matter for ourselves, or in which we might simply not have formed a view. Thus the pessimist continues to treat moral matters as discontinuous with other issues, while the optimist treats them as fundamentally alike.

In my experience the conflict between optimists and pessimists is not easily resolved. The examples that persuade one side fail to convince the other, and nothing more abstract can be appealed to that is not itself controversial. Stalemate rapidly threatens. (Perhaps this is one reason why the topic of moral testimony has been neglected.) Thus in

[3] Almost all those who have written on the topic of moral testimony acknowledge this. Even Kant devoted the closing pages of *The Metaphysics of Morals* to the theme. For more recent examples, see Anscombe, p. 43, and Coady, p. 72.

what follows I will not attempt to settle the dispute. Instead, I explore the options available to the pessimist.

Anyone denying that testimony can be a legitimate source of moral knowledge owes an account of where the difficulty lies. There are two possibilities. A simple, if ultimately misleading, way to approach them is this. The obstacle to reliance on moral testimony might be epistemic, or it might be moral. On the first account, the obstacle lies in a failure to meet some condition that, in general, is necessary for testimony to be a source of knowledge. Moral discourse, for some reason or other, cannot meet the conditions necessary for learning from the word of others. Since the epistemology is wrong, there is no knowledge to be had from testimonial transactions on moral matters. That is why it is illegitimate to let others' claims guide one's moral belief. The alternative account, in contrast, accepts that, in the right circumstances, moral discourse may meet every demand imposed on testimony in general. The obstacle to taking moral testimony lies instead in some norm specific to the moral case. Since the epistemology is right, testimony does make moral knowledge available. (So not every pessimist is a sceptic about moral testimony.) However, some further norm renders it unacceptable to exploit that resource.

So far, we know nothing about what this further norm might be, save that it does not derive from the epistemic demands that in general render testimony a possible source of knowledge. For all we've said, its *content* might be epistemic; and its source, although not epistemic, might lie in considerations that do not clearly count as moral. On the most plausible pessimist position, I will argue, both possibilities are real. This is why it is misleading to think of the contrast as between epistemic and moral obstacles to moral testimony. We do better to characterise it as between *Unavailability* and *Unusability*, between accounts on which moral testimony does not make knowledge available, and those on which, though it does, it is not acceptable to make use of it.

My goal is to argue that the best form of pessimism lies in Unusability. I do so in two stages. First, in Part One, I describe and reject five Unavailability theories. Second, in Part Two, I argue that any Unavailability account is liable to fail. I go on to sketch in a little more detail what an Unusability view should be like. I end by noting the questions this leaves the pessimist to answer. While I maintain a studied neutrality on the debate between pessimism and optimism, I hope to show that some versions of the former are not plausible, and thereby to indicate where the pessimist would best stake his claim.

Part One: Five Unavailability Accounts

I can think of five accounts of what is problematic about moral testimony that locate the difficulty in its failure to make moral knowledge available. Each of these accounts, I suspect, will tempt some pessimists. None, I argue, succeeds. However, I emphasize that I do not take my discussion of any of the five to be comprehensive. For each, there is more that might be said, sometimes much more. My goal is not to offer proofs that these accounts fail, but merely to say enough to show that a good deal of work is needed if they are to satisfy. As things stand, none offers a plausible account of why testimony should fail to make moral knowledge available to its intended recipients.

(i) There Is No Moral Knowledge

> Testimony is a means for learning from others, for coming to know what they know. Thus one way to frame our issue is to ask whether testimony provides a means for handing on moral knowledge. But there is no moral knowledge to hand on. Morality is at best a matter of opinion, and at worst a matter of feeling. If the latter, moral 'claims' are not even the sorts of thing which can be true or false, but expressions of sentiment, perhaps of approval and disapproval. If the former, there are genuine claims here, but nothing in the world, or our contact with it, to render those claims true or false, warranted or otherwise. On either view nothing like moral knowledge can be attained. No wonder, then, that testimony cannot transmit such knowledge. Indeed, if testimony requires knowledge to transmit, there cannot even be testimony about moral matters.

This is not the place to deal with the general meta-ethical questions this sort of account raises. There is a range of non-cognitivist positions which the pessimist might adopt, and a complex set of pressures bearing on which is the most plausible, and on whether it is more so than some cognitivist alternative. Fortunately, the points most salient to our topic can be made without becoming embroiled in these debates.

The problem is that the account ignores an important phenomenon. Whatever the status of moral claims, there is certainly room, in moral matters, for something like scrutiny and deliberation. One may wonder whether the action really would be ungenerous, use one's imagination and intellect to seek for considerations currently left out of account, ask what principle would justify one course of action over another, or try to weigh the pros and cons in an impartial and clear-headed

manner. The things one does in trying to settle a moral matter for oneself are various, but at least many of these operations *seem* epistemic: their point, apparently, is to strengthen one's right to the resulting belief. If we take this appearance at face value, the account of the obstacle to moral testimony is in trouble. For, if moral investigation offers some benefit that is genuinely epistemic, why can't that benefit be passed on to another, by asserting the conclusion one has reached? This is the epistemic function of testimony generally. It lets one party benefit from the epistemic operations—perceptual, deliberative or otherwise—of the other. If such trade occurs outside the moral realm, we should expect it within it. Of course, non-cognitivists are precisely inclined to resist taking the appearances here at face value. They reject not merely moral knowledge, but also genuine justification or warrant for a moral claim. They may deny that the outcome of moral deliberation counts as a belief. Whether they do or not, they will deny that whatever goes by the name of moral deliberation really increases our epistemic right to anything. However, it would be glib to take this to meet the challenge in its most serious form. For what are the benefits that moral investigation yields, if not epistemic? The deeper challenge is to provide an alternative account of the point of moral deliberation, while continuing to exclude the possibility of passing those benefits on to another via something like testimony.

At this point, there are only two options open to the account. The first is to accept that moral deliberation does offer some genuine (non-epistemic) benefits, while treating that fact as irrelevant to the question of moral testimony. On this view, moral deliberation does strengthen our right, in some sense, to the attitudes that are its outcome. That right is not genuinely epistemic. Perhaps those attitudes are not even beliefs. But there is a sort of surrogate for normal deliberation here, and it leaves the moral attitudes that emerge from it in better standing than moral attitudes arrived at by other means. Given that, the question does indeed arise whether those benefits could be passed on to others by our making moral assertions (or whatever non-cognitivism allows that is closest, in the moral realm, to assertion). On that question, non-cognitivism offers the pessimist nothing to say. Its resources are consumed in explaining why real testimony, the kind that traffics in knowledge, is absent from the moral sphere. However, it hopes to duck the question that it fails to answer. Our topic is whether moral knowledge can legitimately be acquired by taking another's testimony. Since there is no moral knowledge, that issue has been settled, whatever we say about the possibility of passing on the non-epistemic benefits moral deliberation in fact yields.

The problem with this is that it is *ad hoc*. It turns on the distinction between real testimony, passing on knowledge; and ersatz testimony, passing on whatever benefit moral deliberation yields. But, while such distinctions are the stock in trade of the non-cognitivist, from the point of view of pessimism they look contrived. The pessimist's starting point is the intuition that we cannot legitimately adopt our moral views on the word of another. That intuition does not operate at the fineness of grain the current suggestion requires. When others offer one their moral views, one should not allow oneself to be influenced by the mere fact that they make certain claims. Listen to their arguments, think the matter through for oneself, but do not be swayed by authority. The intuition is not that we should eschew taking another's word on moral matters because the discourse is not genuinely epistemic; it is that we should eschew it, whatever the nature of that discourse—epistemic or ersatz—turns out to be. Thus, confronted with the non-cognitivist's distinction between real deliberation, belief, assertion, and learning on that basis, and their nearest non-epistemic analogues, the pessimist should feel that the phenomenon that interests her spans both. Non-cognitivism explains why we can't acquire one sort of benefit from the moral claims of others, but is silent on why the other sort is not thereby made available. That cannot, from the pessimist's viewpoint, be the whole truth about the problem with relying on another's moral word. Moreover, since the original phenomenon looks unitary, the pessimist should expect a single account of it. Since non-cognitivism does not provide the whole truth about the obstacle to moral testimony, probably it does not provide any of it.

What, then, of the other option? This is to downgrade still further what moral deliberation offers. It is not just that it fails to offer benefits that are genuinely epistemic; it fails to offer any benefits at all. Given this, there is nothing for moral testimony (or anything resembling testimony) to pass on. Reliance on the moral word of another is not legitimate, since neither knowledge nor some other, non-epistemic, form of good standing is available at the informant's end for her assertions to transmit.

This second option avoids the problems of the first. By articulating an obstacle both to real moral testimony and to any substitute for it, it does not cut the phenomena more finely than the pessimist's intuitions. However, it is even less well suited to articulate the difficulty with moral testimony as many pessimists will see it. Pessimism is defined by the claim that it is illegitimate to rely on the word of others in moral matters (unless such reliance is unavoidable). However, many pessimists will couple this negative injunction to a positive one, that one is obliged, if one is to have any view at all, to think the moral matter

through for oneself. (So the problem posed for the non-cognitivist by moral deliberation is a problem posed by something dear to many pessimists' hearts.) The current proposal makes sense of the negative injunction only by rendering the positive incomprehensible. If moral deliberation offers no benefits, epistemic or otherwise, why on earth should one be obliged to undertake it? Thus the proposal leaves most pessimists with an incoherent position. Few of those it is intended to help will find it appealing.

Of course, the proposal might nonetheless be correct. Perhaps reliance on moral testimony is illegitimate, and the proposal articulates why. But I doubt it. Surely the majority of pessimists are right to want to leave a role for deliberation in moral matters. To deny that the process of thinking through our moral views yields any benefits is to claim that our moral thinking is empty gesturing.[4] Few will be able to take seriously that view of their attempts to decide moral questions. Thus at this point non-cognitivist pessimism faces the dilemma of saying too much to be plausible, or too little to do the work required. And that is its difficulty more generally. It must give due acknowledgement to the role, in our individual moral lives, for moral investigation, while retaining its account of why moral testimony is illicit. More extreme forms of non-cognitivism seem likely to meet the second part of this challenge, but not the first. More subtle variants on them might meet the first, but face a difficult task with respect to the second. Any plausible position on the metaphysics and semantics of moral claims looks set to leave open the question of testimony about morality.[5]

(ii) Moral Knowledge Is the Wrong Kind of Knowledge

There is moral knowledge, but it is knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that. After all, moral beliefs are as nothing if they

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[4] A more subtle position suggests itself: while moral deliberation yields no benefits in which others might share, it does yield benefits to the deliberator herself. Those benefits are, in some way, essentially first personal. Hence there is nothing for moral testimony to pass on, yet moral deliberation is not an empty exercise. However, this is not a position so much as a sketch of one. In what way are the benefits of moral deliberation of necessity benefits only for the deliberator? Worse, an answer risks articulating a problem with moral testimony that is independent of non-cognitivism. The proposal thus threatens not to save the current account, but to replace it.

[5] Coady (*op. cit.*, pp. 69-70) in effect argues against non-cognitivist pessimism, but his reply lacks the focus of mine. He points out that the radical positions needed to undermine moral testimony have various implausible consequences. My point is that among those consequences is an inadequate account of moral deliberation. Given a better account, the issue of testimony reappears. What it's worth one person's while to fashion, it's worth another's to borrow.

> do not lead to action; and at least a good deal of moral insight is an awareness of the appropriateness of certain conduct in context, rather than theoretical knowledge of moral propositions.[6] Yet it is far from clear that knowledge-how can be transmitted through testimony. Moral knowledge is of the wrong kind for testimony to pass on.

I agree that knowledge-how is not transmitted through testimony. Of course, we often acquire know-how from those who already have it, through what they tell us. Nonetheless, something essential to testimony is missing.

When we learn from testimony, we acquire belief, and that belief is warranted. The warrant for that belief is rooted, somehow, in the fact that the informant asserts it. (Quite how it is so rooted is what is at stake between the various accounts of the epistemology of testimony.) Now, knowledge-how might seem to fail to fit this picture by failing even to involve belief. Know-how is standardly conceived as non-propositional. If that means that it does not involve belief at all, the account above is a non-starter. For surely moral knowledge involves belief, for instance beliefs about what one should do, and why one should do it. If knowledge-how is belief-free, it is hardly plausible that moral knowledge is a form of knowledge-how. Thus the account must treat know-how as at least sometimes involving belief, even if those beliefs need not be propositional. But if knowledge-how involves beliefs, what are we to say about the warrant for them? When we acquire know-how on the basis of what others say, it seems simply not to matter whether any beliefs involved are warranted, let alone that the warrant for them be rooted in what the informant says. For in the acquisition of know-how there is only one criterion for the appropriateness of the beliefs the learner acquires—do they enable her to φ, to do whatever it is she is being taught to do? If they do, she has learned how to φ; if they don't, she has not. Far from its mattering whether any beliefs she acquires are warranted, it is not even relevant whether they are true. (Consider the various mis-descriptions, nonetheless valuable as teaching aids, of how to play certain shots in sport.) There seems little room here for the idea that knowledge is passed on because the informant's assertion provides the recipient with warrant for belief. The central elements of testimony are lacking.

However, the very feature of know-how that makes it resistant to testimony also casts doubt on the idea that moral knowledge is a form

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[6] Anscombe, *op. cit*, p. 47.

of knowledge-how. As noted, moral thinking centrally involves beliefs. Some of these are general, such as those invoking principles; others particular, concerning the character of a specific situation or action. For beliefs of either sort, questions are invited about their truth, and about the warrant with which they are held. In knowledge-how, as noted, even where beliefs are involved, their truth, let alone their warrant, is of little concern. We hardly treat moral beliefs this way: as if it does not matter whether they are true, provided they lead someone to act appropriately. Perhaps this is on occasion our attitude; but it is so only in marginal cases, where the agent is someone who requires managing. It is quite inconceivable that this attitude apply to cases which are the norm. One could not, for instance, contemplate adopting it to one's own moral beliefs. This should be enough to persuade anyone that the current proposal fails. It will certainly suffice to render it unappealing to most pessimists. For, as noted in discussing non-cognitivism, most pessimists put a high value on moral deliberation. With non-cognitivism set aside, the value of that deliberation will surely reside in its increasing the likelihood that the view one settles upon is correct.

(iii) Moral Disagreement and Confidence in One's Informants

Testimony requires reliable informants. But morality is a topic for which reliable informants are hard to find. There is simply too much disagreement on moral issues for one to be entitled to assume that any informant is reliable. This lack of consensus is in part due to the perversion of judgement through interest; and in part to the fact that even the disinterested do just disagree more in evaluative matters than in factual ones. Whatever its source, it is sufficiently prevalent to undermine one's confidence in others as moral informants. Hence one cannot legitimately rely on their testimony.

Despite the considerable appeal of its basic idea, this account faces serious problems. First, it threatens to overplay the extent of disagreement on moral matters. If we consider the right issue and the right range of people to address it, we will indeed find a good deal of disagreement. But on other issues, and for other groups of potential informants (for instance, those within a single group or culture) it is far from clear that disagreement is guaranteed, or even common. The pessimist's claim is not that it is sometimes illegitimate to take the moral testimony of others—even the most sanguine optimist will accept that. Rather, his view is that relying on their word

is always illicit (unless unavoidable). Is the real extent of moral disagreement sufficient to justify the complete ban on testimony the pessimist seeks to impose? Second, even if disagreement is widespread, it merely dictates choosing one's informants carefully. A carefully chosen informant will be equally likely to offer opinions one would oneself have formed, whether the matter is moral or not. Yet the pessimist denies we can legitimately accept testimony from any informant, like-minded or not. Of course, one doesn't necessarily want to be given the opinion one would oneself have formed; what one wants is the *truth*. The extent of disagreement might suggest that even carefully chosen informants will offer views that, while matching what one would oneself have thought, have too little claim to be true. But this brings us to a third worry, the most serious of the three. The appeal to disagreement threatens too much. If there is widespread disagreement on a topic, why think one's own opinion is worth more than that of others? True, one can do one's best in one's own thinking to exclude error, to set aside distorting factors and to come to an unprejudiced view. But why doubt that one's informants, especially if carefully chosen, will do just as well? To insist that their moral reflection is worth less than one's own is both arrogant and cynical. Without that insistence, the price of scepticism about the worth of their moral opinions is doubt about the merits of one's own. If the views of others are like as not vitiated by interest or myopia, why think oneself better off? In the absence of an answer to this question, widespread disagreement dictates not just unwillingness to believe what one is told, but reluctance to form moral beliefs by any means at all.

(iv) The Importance of Moral Matters

In general, the more important a topic, the more important it is to be right about it. How important it is to be right affects what counts as legitimate sources of belief. For the most important topics, one is required to think things through for oneself, so as to minimise the risk of error. Since many non-moral matters are not particularly important, it is often legitimate to learn about them from testimony. Moral matters, in contrast, are always sufficiently important to require thinking through for oneself.

At the heart of this account is a contextualist principle: the more important the matter, the higher the bar for what counts as knowledge. Let us, for the sake of argument, accept it. The account further

assumes that settling a matter for oneself is always more reliable than relying on the word of another. That seems questionable, both in general and in the moral realm in particular. For might I not know myself to be a rather unreliable judge on the matter in hand, and know my informant to be more reliable? However, let us waive that worry, too. Even so, it is not clear that the account fits our epistemic practice, either as it really is for non-moral matters, or as the pessimist takes it to be in the moral domain.

Non-moral matters can be very important, without forcing self-reliance. Suppose I go rock-climbing for the first time. Nothing less than my life is at stake, yet I take my companion's word for it that the procedure is safe. Of course, I am not wholly dependent on what she says. I can see that the rope is strong, and that the various carabiners, connectors and metalwork that hold us to the rock-face are well made. I know that rock-climbing is popular, and that if the fatality rate were very high, it would have been banned, or at least there would be public scandal at the loss of life. However, what I can see and work out for myself hardly guarantees that what I am about to do is safe—the rope is strong, but is it strong enough, or sufficiently resistant to abrasion? The gear is well-made, but is it right for these conditions, for this sort of rock in this sort of weather? Above all, is my partner using it properly? And my reliance on what the government would do, or the scandal that many deaths would create, is, if not exactly reliance on other testimony, very closely related to it. (I rely on what others would have said, were there a problem, rather than on what they do say; but I am still letting their judgement of the activity guide my own.) Yet surely I need not be making an epistemic error, in setting out on the climb. Thus here the question is of vital importance to me, and yet I am not required to exclude what I learn from others from my deliberations. I can legitimately form a view even though what others say (or do not say) is a key part of my grounds for it. The case is far from unique—consider flying, taking medicine, or even trying a new food.

This is enough to show that, whatever we make of the account's contextualist principle or its assumption of the superiority of thinking things through for oneself, taken individually; together they are counter-intuitive. One can legitimately form belief, even on matters of great importance, without being obliged to avoid relying on another's word. There must, then, be some mistake in the account, even if we are not sure quite where to place the blame. The pessimist might attempt to dodge this conclusion by noting that the example is one where only my own well-being is at stake. Perhaps I am not only free to act

imprudently, but free to form beliefs on weak grounds where the matter is important only from a prudential point of view. However, the above cases are easily extended so as to block that. Simply consider examples in which I am deciding whether to let my child rock-climb, fly or take the medicine the doctor prescribes.

Although this objection is sufficient to cast serious doubt on the account, it is perhaps worth noting in addition that it fails to license the complete ban on taking moral testimony (where avoidable) that the pessimist desires. Moral matters need not always be crucial: there are issues on which any moral view has the character of scruple. Will the pessimist accept that in these relatively minor issues it is legitimate to adopt the views of others? If she does, her position is blurring; but if she doesn't, the account fails to capture the phenomena as she sees them. Of course, moral matters always possess a *kind* of importance which non-moral matters lack: only the former are morally significant. But the pessimist can hardly use that to restore the sharp division she seeks without emptying the account of content. It does not help us to understand the obstacle to testimony about morality to be told that it lies in the fact that the questions at stake have *moral* importance. The problem is that it is not apparent what other kind of importance the account can appeal to.

(v) Testimony and Expertise

> Testimony requires expertise. You should take the word only of those who have authority on the matter; those who are expert, at least in comparison with you. Yet the idea of moral expertise is highly problematic. For centuries, certainly since the idea was given powerful formulation by Kant, it has been a commonplace that every moral agent, once out of childhood and if free from mental or moral incapacity of a pathological kind, enjoys the capacity to divine what morality demands. Where you can settle a moral issue for yourself, no one is expert on that matter, relative to you. Since testimony requires the informant to be more expert than her listener, you cannot take testimony on that matter. Given the commonplace, every moral issue is one you can settle for yourself. Thus, for every moral issue, you not only can settle it yourself, you must do so.

Perhaps this explains why many people are inclined to the pessimist position. Certainly the theme of expertise looms large in the sparse

contemporary literature on testimony about morality.[7] However, it is not an explanation which justifies. For, in any sense of 'expertise' in which it is absent from morality, it is simply untrue that testimony requires expertise.[8]

Why think that, wherever one can learn that *p* through testimony, one's informant must be an expert? She clearly need not be an expert *absoluter*. I can tell you the way to your hotel, even though I've been in the city no longer than you, and thus hardly count as expert in its geography in absolute terms. So, at most, the idea is that the informant is necessarily expert *relative to* the recipient. But even this seems too strong. True, the informant must know something the recipient does not. For the recipient can hardly learn what he already knows, and the informant can hardly pass on information on matters on which she is as ignorant as her audience.[9] But it simply trivialises the notion of expertise, and its connection to testimony, to dress up these undisputed facts by describing the informant as *expert* on whether *p*, relative to the recipient. Certainly this trivial notion is insufficient for explaining the difficulty with testimony about morality. For in this trivial sense experts on moral matters are readily available. I might have thought about a moral matter that you have not considered; and I might have come to the right conclusion about it. To avoid such trivialisation, we need a more substantial notion of expertise. We can then ask what the relation is between expertise, so conceived, and testimony.

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7 Anscombe (*op. cit.*) and Watt (*op. cit.*) structure their discussions around the question whether there can be moral authorities. Jones equates her claim that there can be moral testimony, in a very limited sphere, with the idea there is at least some room for moral expertise (*op. cit.,* pp. 63-6). Finally, Coady (*op. cit.*) seems tempted by precisely the explanation above. He defines 'natural' testimony in part by the condition that the informant 'has the relevant competence, authority or credentials to state truly' the testified claim (p. 42). He then centres one strand in his discussion of moral testimony around the hypothesis that there are no moral experts, and 'hence' that here this condition on testimony can't be met (p. 72). Given my argument below, either his condition is false, mistakenly requiring expertise for testimony, or his discussion contains a non-sequitur, the absence of moral experts not ensuring the failure of the condition, properly understood.

8 Nor does expertise require testimony. Expertise might consist, not in the authority to proclaim, but in an ability to bring others to see the facts for themselves. There is one link between expertise and testimony. Part of our notion of an expert is someone obliged to make up her own mind on matters in her field. But that experts cannot rely on testimony hardly shows that we can only rely on the testimony of experts. Nor does our ability to work out the moral facts for ourselves make us experts in a sense *obliging* us to do that.

9 Perhaps this does not require the informant to *know* the proposition testified to. See J. Lackey, 'Testimonial Knowledge & Transmission', *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 197 (1999).

I propose the following. A is expert on a type of subject matter *m*, relative to another person B, just if A has at her disposal epistemic resources useful for settling questions which fall under *m*, resources which B lacks. The resources in question can be various—knowledge of the area more generally, recognitional skills, methods for acquiring and handling evidence, relevant patterns of reasoning, and so on. The idea of a resource is thus very broad. The expert may have epistemic abilities the non-expert lacks, but I do not think our ordinary notion requires this. It suffices that she have taken more opportunities to exercise the abilities they share, and thereby have come to know more about the topic than him. What is essential is a certain degree of generality. One is expert, relative to another person, over a certain field, perhaps quite limited (history in general, the history of games, or the history of snooker in Ireland, for instance). What is not possible is to be expert, relative to another, as to whether *p*, where whether *p* constitutes the full limit of one's expertise. For instance, one cannot be expert, relative to another, on whether the pink is to be potted before or after the blue, if one's only claim to this title is that one knows the answer to this question, and one's companion does not.

If this is what is meant by expertise, it should be clear that testimony does not require expertise, in any form in which expertise is missing from morality. First, we often take testimony from those whose advantage over us is one of opportunity, not epistemic ability. A stranger who guides me round her town need not be a better navigator than me—she may merely have learned more about its geography. This observation already undermines the proposed account of the obstacle to moral testimony. The plausibility of the idea that there are no moral experts lies in the thought that we are all equal with respect to our *ability* to solve moral problems. It is simply obvious that we are not equal in terms of exercised opportunities—for any set of moral questions you care to name, some will have devoted more time to thinking about them than others. Provided their greater competence extends across a range of questions in the area, these folk will count as experts, in my sense, relative to their peers. The account fails to tell us why the latter cannot take the former's testimony.

Second, we are in general ready to rely on the word of those who are not expert at all. Suppose I ask a stranger which team won the big match. Can't I legitimately take his word on the matter, even though he neither has abilities I lack, nor knows more about today's results in general than I do? He may, for instance, only have read the result on a billboard, or heard the cheer from the home supporters as the final

whistle blew. I may have to consider various factors in judging whether to take his word, but I do not need to rule out the possibility that his knowledge is limited in this way. Of course, I must conclude, in accepting his testimony, that he knows something I don't. But his advantage over me is restricted to the proposition which is moot; the generality required for expertise is lacking.

So there are in fact three questions concerning the possibility of moral testimony. One is whether we can ever learn moral claims from those who are expert, relative to us, in terms of abilities relevant to the question in hand. A second is whether we can take the moral testimony of those whose expertise over us reduces to greater exercise of abilities we share. Finally, there is the question whether we can take moral testimony from non-experts. In other areas all three kinds of testimony are legitimate sources of belief. Even if it is true that in the moral realm there is very little room for the notion of expertise, this is only true for expertise of ability. Thus lack of moral expertise can at most block some testimony about morality. The account does, at best, a third of the work the pessimist needs.

Part Two: Why the Pessimist Should Opt for Unusability

These are the most tempting Unavailability accounts of what is problematic about moral testimony. Their failure is thus significant. However, that failure hardly proves that no such account can succeed. In what follows, I cast doubt on the prospects for any account of this form. Testimony can make moral knowledge available to those to whom it is directed. The difficulty, if any, must lie in some norm rendering it illegitimate to use that knowledge. I go on to make some suggestions about what an account in terms of Unusability might look like.[10]

[10] The pessimist accepts testimony as a legitimate source of moral belief where neither making up one's own mind nor agnosticism are possible. Does this already favour Unusability? If, as Unavailability has it, testimony cannot offer moral knowledge, how can one legitimately form belief on that basis, however dire the alternatives? However, each Unavailability account can find some response to this challenge. The appeal to expertise (v) is not even under threat. Where someone cannot settle a moral matter for herself, there are experts (of ability) on that matter, relative to her, after all—her potential informants. The importance of the topic (iv) might raise the bar for what counts as a legitimate source of belief, but the inability to do without belief or to settle the issue for oneself will simply exert pressure in the other direction. Similarly with disagreement (iii): it might render all informants untrustworthy, and thus undermine the warrant their testimony provides, but where one has no alternative, that warrant may be sufficient. Finally, the know-how account (ii) and non-cognitivism (i) can both reconstrue what is offered by testimony one cannot but take. Perhaps knowledge is not thereby acquired, or not at least knowledge-that, but it does not follow that nothing of value is.

Suppose that you are uncertain on some moral matter. Perhaps you are a member of a union that has just voted to strike. The consequences for those you serve will be dire, causing you serious doubts over whether to inflict them. On the other hand, your collective demands are just, and loyalty to the union requires obeying the call. Faced with these conflicting pressures, you do not know what to think. Some of your peers, although equally sensitive to these considerations, have made up their minds. Although none thinks the answer obvious, each has independently and tentatively come to the same conclusion. Why should you not reason as follows? There is a subject matter, here the question of whether to strike, and a set of thinkers attempting to find out about it. These thinkers, all of whom are of reasonable competence in such matters, have given the topic decent consideration, and have settled on the same answer. Surely this provides some grounds for thinking that answer correct. Further, while it is true that the informants themselves express very limited confidence in their view, that they all do so mitigates this. For it suggests that they have all applied the same method to get their answer—for instance, that they are all sensitive to the same considerations, and the rather delicate overall balance between them. Their settling on a common method for reaching an answer is best explained by its being appropriate, and their settling on a common answer is best explained by its being the right one.

It is hard to dismiss out of hand the possibility of reasoning in this way. It appeals to considerations we might think of as Humean. That is, it attempts to find reasons, available to the recipient of testimony, for thinking that what she is told is true. These considerations will include such factors as the proven reliability of her informants on matters of this nature, and the likelihood that in the present circumstances they are being sincere. Perhaps they will include thoughts about the importance of believing truly on the topic, and about the consequent level of support any such argument would need to provide. There is no denying that arguments of this form can, in general, provide support for belief. Moreover, it seems likely that the premises such arguments require will be available to at least some thinkers, in at least some cases of moral uncertainty. This is especially plausible given the discussion in Part One. I argued against the appeal to disagreement, importance and expertise as quite general accounts of the obstacle to moral testimony. Those arguments have implications for Humean reasoning in particular. They remove grounds for thinking that suitable Humean arguments will not be available to recipients of moral testimony. Even if one rejects my arguments, one should acknowledge the possibility that in some circumstances a Humean argument for taking moral testimony

might be both valid and sound.[11] For instance, whatever the difficulties in finding appropriate moral informants, presumably it is not *impossible* that there be such; it is merely that, as the world is, one can in fact never be sufficiently confident of having found one. Given all this, it seems hard to deny that there could be a Humean argument that provided justification for taking testimony on some moral matter. And given that, why should the justification not, in some context, be sufficient for knowledge of the claim testified to?

Of course, faced with this question, one option for the pessimist is to concede the point. There can be Humean justifications for believing the moral claims that others make. In principle, then, it could be legitimate to form one's moral views on that basis. It's just that in practice the general importance of moral matters, and the extent of disagreement over them, render such adoption rarely, if ever, legitimate. The result would be a position that even cautious optimists might share. It accepts that there is nothing fundamentally different about testimony on moral matters; it's just that the details are generally stacked against taking such testimony in ways they aren't for many other topics. However, what if the pessimist refuses to resign himself to this eirenic outcome? What other options are available?

One is to enter the debate about how testimony operates. Although Hume himself thought that in general our right to take testimony depends on considerations of the kind I've called Humean,[12] others have disagreed. They hold that testimony's epistemic efficacy, its ability to yield knowledge, does not depend on the availability to the recipient of any argument.[13] Rather than preserving the recipient's epistemic autonomy, by offering her grounds of her own for believing the claims she is offered, such positions see the recipient's epistemic position as directly dependent on that of her informants. She knows only if they do, and she knows if they do, provided certain framing conditions are met (where these do not include the availability to her of an argument for taking their word). Let us follow recent tradition, and label this sort of view *anti-reductionism* about testimony. Suppose the pessimist adopts this sort of account of how testimony in general operates. Then it is open to him to concede that Humean arguments justify adopting

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11 At least, one should provided one thinks that moral matters admit of knowledge at all—anyone determinedly clinging to the non-cognitivist account will reject Humean considerations outright.

12 *Inquiry*, ch. IX.

13 Those who have taken this line include Thomas Reid (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*), John McDowell ('Knowledge by Hearsay', *Meaning, Knowledge & Reality*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 414-443) and Tyler Burge ('Content Preservation', *Philosophical Review* (1993), pp. 457-88).

moral testimony, without accepting that moral matters ever, even in principle, allow for the acquisition of knowledge in the way standard for testimony about other affairs. However strong a Humean argument for taking moral testimony might in principle be, it can never offer the recipient knowledge by the means standard in testimonial transactions. Those transactions work on a quite different basis, and nothing said so far shows that basis to be available in the moral case.

This strategy secures only a Pyrrhic victory. First, it is not clear that this form of pessimism is interesting. It accepts that the word of others can be a source of moral knowledge. It simply cannot be so in the way standard for testimony on other matters. Why would we care that we learn from moral testimony by means other than those that hold elsewhere, given that it is, nonetheless, a possible source of knowledge? True, it is open to the pessimist who has taken this route to deny that such learning opportunities are as widely available as those for other matters. But that aspect of his view is independent of the claims about how testimony works. As far as the central question goes—can we learn from moral testimony?—the current proposal concedes the central point. Second, and relatedly, it is far from clear how the position could be motivated. Even given the anti-reductionist account of testimony in general, why think that moral testimony cannot operate that way? Since the position concedes that such testimony can, via Humean means, make knowledge available, it cannot appeal to the impossibility of learning from others' moral claims. It must appeal to more focussed phenomena concerning the means by which any knowledge could be acquired. It is at least not apparent where suitable considerations might lie.

The pessimist does better, I think, to take a more radical course. Humean considerations can, at least in principle, justify the moral claim some informant makes. Testimony can make moral knowledge available. Indeed, it can do so whether or not the means by which it does are Humean. General epistemic considerations present no obstacle to learning from moral testimony. But it does not follow that there are no obstacles at all. The epistemology may be right, but some other norm nonetheless stands between the recipient and the legitimate formation of moral belief. Testimony might make moral knowledge available, but one should not exploit that resource.

The pessimist is here invited to reject Unavailability in favour of Unusability as the source of the difficulty with taking moral testimony. Let me say a little more about what such an account might claim. What is this norm that prevents adopting the moral belief one is offered in testimony, even when the testimonial situation yields

justification for that belief, and even if that justification is powerful enough for what is offered to count as knowledge?

Well, what is it that a valid and sound Humean argument fails to provide, when directed at a moral belief? The natural answer is that it fails to give one a grasp of the *moral* reasons for that belief. Let's return to your dilemma over whether to strike. Suppose you consider the Humean argument above for adopting the view of your colleagues, and that you find it persuasive. You accept their view, on the basis of this rationale. On the day of the strike itself someone asks you why you have opted for your chosen course. In reply, you trot out the Humean argument. You talk about the likelihood that your informants have converged on the right answer, the fact that their shared caution about that answer itself suggests they've converged on the same method for settling the issue, and so on. Whatever you are doing, you are not offering moral grounds for your decision. To do that, you would have to return to the factors you found difficult to reconcile. You would have to talk about the justice of the union's demands, the cost to those it serves, and so forth. This is something that you remain unable to do, at least in a satisfactory way. For, while you can list the relevant considerations, you were unable to come to a settled opinion of the balance between them. Although you now believe the balance to lie one way, rather than another, you remain unable to say why it lies just so, to explain quite how one set of considerations outweigh the others.[14] Thus, while the testimony of your peers, supported by the Humean considerations, may have left you in a position to know what should be done, it does not leave you knowing why it should be. Insofar as you have settled the matter on Humean grounds, you have reasons for your belief but not moral reasons for it.

This suggests that, if there is some further norm proscribing adopting one's moral beliefs on the word of others, it is the following:

> **The Requirement:** having the right to a moral belief requires one to grasp the *moral* grounds for it.

It is not only belief justified by Humean considerations that fails to meet this demand. Testimony cannot meet The Requirement, however it operates. On the Humean account, the recipient has reasons for adopting the belief, but not moral reasons. And on the anti-reductionist account, the recipient has no reasons at all. Instead, she exploits an

[14] The testimony of your peers might bring you to see the balance as lying in a certain place. However, if it does so, that insight, not their testimony, is the ground for your moral belief.

epistemic framework that transmits warrant from the reasons available to her informant, to the belief she adopts. Perhaps Humean and anti-reductionist theories of testimony do not exhaust the possibilities. However, it is hard to see how any plausible account could allow moral testimony to meet The Requirement. For how could mere testimony to a moral claim offer one a grasp of the moral reasons for it? Thus The Requirement provides an impediment to taking moral testimony, whatever general theory of the epistemology of testimony is correct. The obstacle stands even if moral testimony exploits diverse epistemic frameworks, for instance, sometimes making knowledge available by Humean means, sometimes by anti-reductionist ones. Since The Requirement excludes recipients from using the knowledge made available by any such means, it articulates an obstacle to moral testimony with the range the pessimist desires.

The pessimist may find The Requirement appealing in other ways. Return one last time to your decision whether to strike. There is something strange, when asked why you hold your view, in answering by appeal to Humean considerations. The pessimist may well feel that these are the wrong sort of considerations to adduce, when asked about a moral belief. And he may do so, even though he accepts that in other contexts Humean considerations can be trotted out without embarrassment. Asked to justify my claim that Liverpool won the big match, I need feel no awkwardness in simply saying that X (who was there) told me so. And in response to the challenge to defend my choice of camera, it would be fine to trot out an argument to the effect that the friends from whom I took my view, although not experts on such matters, are all reasonably diligent and able, and that they converge on a given choice as the best one for people like us. To the extent that the pessimist is moved by this contrast, The Requirement will seem attractive. It articulates the demand that you, confronted with a moral choice, cannot meet, though you should, but to which I, in forming my views on non-moral matters, am not subject.

Despite these attractions, The Requirement will not suit the pessimist's needs if it is too close to his basic claim. He seeks a norm that is the source of the inadmissability of moral testimony, not merely a gloss on that phenomenon. One might wonder whether The Requirement manages this. What more is there to saying that we must grasp the moral grounds of the moral beliefs we adopt, than saying that we cannot form those beliefs on another's word? However, there is more to the former claim than the latter. It excludes, for instance, legitimately adopting moral beliefs that pop into one's head from nowhere, as if by a form of divination. It also excludes forming moral beliefs by guessing. And, in both cases, it does so however well the beliefs thus reached

correlate with what, by other means, one comes to conclude is the moral truth. This is enough to show that the accusation of being a mere gloss is unjust.

The example of divination might, however, raise a worry. Do we think that moral beliefs arrived at by divination would be illegitimate? Don't we, indeed, consider it quite acceptable for someone to say they find something morally wrong, even though they freely admit they can say nothing more about why it is than that it 'feels' so? Doesn't this show The Requirement to be implausible? The worry is misplaced. In allowing the legitimacy of moral beliefs based on nothing more than 'feeling' we are not, in fact, allowing beliefs in the absence of a grasp of the moral reasons for them. Rather, what the case shows is how broad a notion of a moral reason The Requirement should deploy. In allowing belief based on 'feeling' we leave room for such things as seeing the proposed action in a certain light, or finding that it conflicts with our settled moral dispositions to act and (in a stricter sense) to feel in certain ways. Someone reacting in such ways as these to the claim that some action is morally acceptable does indeed grasp *what* is wrong with it, for all that she is unable to articulate that wrongness.[15] Moral divination, in contrast, would involve no sense of what underpins the moral beliefs that come upon one. Thus, provided we understand it correctly, The Requirement can avoid these implausible consequences while remaining distinct from the denial that one can take moral testimony.

I suggest, then, that The Requirement offers the pessimist what he needs. The norm it embodies, although epistemic in content, is not itself part of, or derived from, general epistemology. On the contrary, it holds whether or not the epistemology of the situation is kosher, excluding adopting moral belief even when the testimonial context offers one knowledge of that claim.[16] It thus allows the pessimist to abandon the fruitless search for some epistemic problem with moral testimony. It also allows him to explain the conflict in intuitions over the legitimacy of testimony as a source of moral belief. Optimists are right to think that there is nothing *epistemically* wrong with moral testimony; pessimists are right to think that there is something wrong

[15] This is a point McDowell has emphasized. See, for instance, 'Virtue and Reason' in *Mind, Value and Reality* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

[16] It would thus be a mistake to see The Requirement as an extreme form of epistemological internalism. Like internalism, it requires the subject to have access to reasons, if his belief is to be legitimately adopted. It goes beyond standard internalism in severely restricting, in the case of moral belief, the reasons he must have. But unlike internalism, it does not do so as part of an account of justification or knowledge—either in general, or in the moral case in particular.

with it, nevertheless. The Requirement has something like the scope the pessimist sought, without simply glossing his basic position. At least something can be said in favour of it, and it avoids at least one implausible consequence that might be thought to threaten. Finally, it articulates an obstacle specific to the moral case, thereby promising to secure the pessimist's central ambition, of treating the acceptability of testimony about moral and other matters as turning on a difference in kind, not merely one of degree.[17]

However, although The Requirement offers the pessimist a good deal of what he wants, it raises two obvious questions. First, why think The Requirement holds; and, second, if it holds, why does it? In many areas it is perfectly legitimate to adopt a belief without grasping reasons that reflect the subject matter itself. One can, for instance, learn some chemical fact without having to grasp the chemical grounds for it—without, that is, understanding why it holds. One can do so on the basis of testimony. Perhaps one has Humean reasons for believing what one is told; perhaps, if one's epistemic situation is as the anti-reductionist describes it, no reasons at all. Either way, one lacks a grasp of the chemical grounds for the belief, and yet one's belief is quite legitimate. Why is moral thinking different in this respect? Perhaps it is not the only area in which some such requirement obtains—some have suggested that mathematical knowledge is another.[18] But such cases are at least very unusual. When someone proposes that an area is governed in this way, we will naturally want reasons to think so. Even accepting that it is, we will want to know why such a norm applies here. What is the deeper demand, if any, which imposes The Requirement on moral thinking? Is it, for instance, that moral belief is bound to action, and action to responsibility, in some way rendering it illegitimate to pass the buck for one's moral beliefs, even though we can do that with belief in general? Is it that moral demands only bind us to the extent that we are able to grasp why they hold? Or is it perhaps that a grasp of moral reasons is itself of independent value, as grasp of reasons in other areas is not? Various possibilities suggest themselves, some rooted

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[17] What of the pessimist's concession that one may take testimony where one cannot do otherwise? How can The Requirement be reconciled with that? Simple: in those circumstances, The Requirement is lifted. Like many norms, it is defeasible; though only in rather special circumstances is it defeated.

[18] B. Williams, 'Knowledge and Reasons', in *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. G. H. von Wright, The Hague, 1972, pp. 1-11; R. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 1st edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966. However, since their worry is that one cannot fully understand a mathematical proposition without knowing the proof, they seem to have in mind a condition on testimony's making mathematical knowledge available to one. Since the norm thus articulated governs the availability of knowledge, not its use, any analogy here to The Requirement is severely limited.

in well-known and highly developed ethical theories. This is not the place to begin assessing those positions. Nor, therefore, is now the time to settle whether the norm that excludes adopting moral testimony is itself rooted in moral considerations, i.e., considerations of the kind that ground first order moral claims. For the moment, I merely note that, while pessimism will be most plausible if centred around The Requirement, the position will not be established until it offers satisfactory answers to these further questions. What is wrong with moral testimony is not that it necessarily fails to yield knowledge. The possibility remains, however, that there is nothing wrong with it at all.[19]

[19] For patient and constructive criticism, I am grateful to Nick Dent, Paul Faulkner, David Owens, Leif Wenar and an anonymous referee. The paper benefited considerably from a stimulating one day workshop on moral testimony at the University of Birmingham. I thank Max Kolbel for organizing this event, and the audience and the other participants—Lizzie Fricker, David Owens and Richard Holton—for their comments. I also received helpful discussion from audiences at the universities of Bristol, Reading, Stirling, Sussex and British Columbia. Research on this paper was supported by the generous award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.