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Moral Testimony

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Abstract

Testimony is an important source of our knowledge about the world. But to some, there seems something odd, perhaps even wrong, about trusting testimony about specifically moral matters. In this paper, I discuss several different explanations of what might be wrong with trusting moral testimony. These include the possibility that there is no moral knowledge; that moral knowledge cannot be transmitted by moral testimony; that there are reasons not to trust moral testimony either because you should try to gain and use "moral understanding" to make your moral judgements instead or because doing so is damaging to your moral character in various ways. Finally, I discuss some "debunking explanations" according to which it is right and rational to trust moral testimony from a trustworthy source. © 2013 The Author. Philosophy Compass © 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1. The Puzzle Pure Moral Testimony

Suppose that you are wondering whether or not it is morally permissible for you to eat meat. Is it acceptable for you to ask your friend if it is ok, trust what she says and act on that basis? No one disputes that (other things being equal) it is fine to trust her on non-moral matters such as whether animals can suffer. It is also all right to take moral advice where this involves critically assessing what you have been told. Concerning a distinctively moral question, however, it seems important to make up your own mind rather than put your trust in others.

Let us call testimony about a specifically moral matter, moral testimony. And let us call a piece of moral testimony that is not supported by reasons – for instance, "it is wrong to eat animals" – pure moral testimony.[1] When you trust pure moral testimony, your own moral judgement is formed and sustained purely by someone else's moral judgement: you defer to her.[2] Is there something odd about forming moral judgements in this way?

The claim is strongly associated with Kant, whose view is that the moral law is autonomous; that it must be "self-given". But it is not restricted to the Kantian tradition: Bernard Williams finds the very suggestion ridiculous (Williams 1995, 205). Sarah McGrath describes the claim as a "datum" (McGrath 2011). But even philosophers who agree that there is something "odd" about trusting moral testimony, disagree about what exactly is odd. For instance, is trusting pure moral testimony unacceptable or merely less than ideal? Are there moral reasons against trusting testimony or epistemic reasons (or both)?

Other philosophers have argued that trusting pure moral testimony can be rational and right. For instance, Karen Jones describes Peter, who is committed to non-sexism and non-racism but not very good at identifying sexist and racist conduct: "He could pick out egregious instances of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that 'sexist' or 'racist' applied to more subtle instances when the reasons for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the word to nonegregious new cases. Problems arose for Peter when he could not see the reasons why the women were calling someone sexist, and could not see, or could not see as evidence, the considerations that the women thought supported viewing the would-be members as sexist . . . I think that in this

case, Peter should have been willing to accept the women's testimony that these men were 'sexist.'" (Jones, 1999 p. 59–60).

However, there is widespread agreement that there are some circumstances in which trusting pure moral testimony is acceptable: children may trust testimony, and perhaps some adults should too, if they have good reason to think, as does Peter, that their own judgements are too biassed or flawed.

The (supposed) oddity of trusting moral testimony generates a puzzle. This is sometimes described as a puzzling asymmetry between moral and non-moral testimony. How can it be odd to trust pure moral testimony when it would not be odd to trust non-moral testimony? However, since questions have been raised about other kinds of testimony, notably aesthetic testimony but perhaps others too, it is not perhaps wise to rely on a contrast between moral and non-moral testimony.[3]

Another way of putting the problem focuses instead on the potential gains to trusting moral testimony: how can it be unacceptable, or even peculiar, to trust moral testimony when by doing so you could gain knowledge? This is what I will call the puzzle of pure moral testimony.

This puzzle relies on a number of assumptions, notably that (a) there is such a thing as moral knowledge, (b) that moral knowledge can be gained by trusting moral testimony and (c) that knowledge is always worth having (at least that gaining knowledge – at least knowledge of relevant and significant truths – is always acceptable). I will look at each of them in turn.

2. Explanations of the puzzle of pure moral testimony

2.1. IS THERE ANY MORAL KNOWLEDGE?

If there is no moral knowledge, then one standard reason for trusting testimony – that you can gain knowledge – would not apply to moral testimony. This would explain the difference between moral testimony and non-moral testimony too.

It is of course very controversial whether there can be moral knowledge, and this is not a question that can be settled here. But there are strong reasons for thinking that scepticism about moral knowledge is not an adequate solution to the puzzle. First, because trusting testimony can be useful even if knowledge is not passed on through it: perhaps true beliefs, or better justified beliefs can be passed on. So in order to show that we have no reason to trust moral testimony, we would have to deny moral truth and better (and worse) justified moral beliefs too.[4]

Second, if you were to accept that there is no moral knowledge, moral truth or justified moral beliefs, surely the appropriate response would be to refrain from making any moral judgements at all. But according to the puzzle about moral testimony, failing to trust moral testimony is not part of a policy of rejecting moral judgements altogether. Rather, you do not trust testimony because you think that it is important to make up your own mind instead. This feature of the puzzle cannot be explained by a wholesale rejection of moral truth, knowledge and justified belief.

2.2. CAN MORAL KNOWLEDGE BE GAINED BY TRUSTING PURE TESTIMONY?

One standard reason for trusting testimony is to gain knowledge. If, for some reason, you could not gain moral knowledge through testimony, this standard reason for trusting it would not hold. But if we have accepted that there is moral knowledge, why could you not pass it on through testimony?

One possibility is that moral knowledge is not propositional knowledge but a kind of know-how.[5] Propositional knowledge can be transmitted through moral testimony but it is quite plausible that know-how cannot, or not very easily. It is quite difficult, for instance, to learn how to swim or to ride a bike by having someone explain to you what to do. It is also quite plausible that acting morally well is partly a matter of know-how, for example, you need to know how to be kind rather than patronising. But what is not plausible is that all moral knowledge is know-how. Some of it is propositional – I know that I should be kind, not patronising, for instance – and why could I not learn that from testimony?

A second possibility is that you cannot really learn a moral proposition by pure testimony because in order to know it you need to understand it, and in order to understand it, you need to have access to the reasons why it is true.[6] In pure moral testimony, you are precisely told that you should be kind (for instance) but not why. So if this were right, pure moral testimony could not give you moral knowledge.

But it is very implausible that, in general, to understand that a proposition is true you need access to the reasons why it is true, and there is no reason to think morality is any different. I can understand what someone means by saying "that remark was unkind" even if I do not know why what they say is true.

These two arguments that we cannot gain moral knowledge by moral testimony are not very convincing. But perhaps doing so is possible but just very difficult.

For instance, perhaps in order to gain knowledge by testimony, we need to find people who are a reliable source of testimony – moral experts – and finding them is very hard. There are no accredited, or universally recognised moral experts. What is more, there is a lot of disagreement in ethics, and this should undermine our confidence in all potential testifiers.[7] Could this explain why trusting moral testimony is odd?

The difficulty of identifying reliable moral testifiers may very well play a role in our suspicion of moral testimony. But on the other hand, we do not need an expert in the sense of someone who is always right about any moral question. We just need someone who is right about this one: someone who has the right experience and good judgement. It is perhaps not so difficult to find someone like that.

And in any case, the puzzle is that, in failing to trust moral testimony, we do not just think: "I cannot be sure that this person is reliable" (though we do sometimes think that) we also think: "it is important that I think about this matter myself." It is hard to see how this could be explained by a general worry about the reliability of moral judgements and the amount of moral disagreement because those worries apply equally to myself and my own moral judgements.

2.3. IS IT ALWAYS RIGHT AND RATIONAL TO GAIN MORAL KNOWLEDGE?

Suppose that you can get moral knowledge by pure moral testimony. It seems that the only reason for not doing so is because moral knowledge is not worth having, or at least, that you are not aiming to acquire it at the moment. But why not? The recent literature on the puzzle of moral testimony has focussed on this question. There are a number of related suggestions in the literature. Perhaps you need the "right" to moral belief where this "right" requires that you are aware of the reasons why it is true.[8] Perhaps you need to understand why the moral judgements is true.[9] The most fully developed version of this response is Hills's account of moral understanding, which is sketched below.

2.3.1. Moral understanding, virtue and morally worthy action

According to Hills, moral understanding is understanding why *p*, where *p* is a moral proposition. In order to understand why *p*, you need to grasp the reasons why *p* where this grasp is explained

as a set of abilities. So to understand why p, you need to judge that p and that q is why p and in the right sort of circumstances, you can successfully:

(i) follow an explanation of why p given by someone else;
(ii) explain why p in your own words;
(iii) draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q;
(iv) draw the conclusion that p' (or that probably p') from the information that q' (where p' and q' are similar to but not identical to p and q);
(v) given the information that p, give the right explanation, q;
(vi) given the information that p', give the right explanation, q'.

Understanding why p, like knowledge that p, is factive, but in other respects it is obviously different. It also appears to be different from knowing why p, since it is possible to know why p, but not to have the abilities to explain why p' or draw the conclusion that p' from the information that q'.[10]

Because it essentially involves a set of abilities, moral understanding is more similar to know-how. And like know-how, it is usually not successfully transmissible by testimony. In order to acquire moral understanding, you need to develop the relevant set of abilities through practise.

Why does moral understanding matter? In the first place, it is valuable because it enables you to make true moral judgements in other circumstances.

Second, moral understanding plays an important role in virtue and morally worthy action. Morally worthy action is right action for the right reasons. If you have moral understanding, and you act on that basis, you will act for the right reasons.

The most familiar examples illustrating the difference between right action and morally worthy action involve different types of motivation. Kant famously compared two shopkeepers both of whom give the right change to their customers. But one is motivated by duty and his action is morally worthy; the other by self-interest and his action is not worthy (Kant 1996).

Suppose that you give your customers the right change only because you were told by someone else that doing so is right. You may have good motivations (unlike the self-interested shopkeeper) but you did not choose your action on the basis of the reasons that make it right (rather, because you were told that it was right). According to Hills, your action is right but it is not morally worthy.

Similarly, Hills argues that a virtuous person typically has and exercises moral understanding to make her moral judgements. She herself is sensitive to moral reasons directly not indirectly via other people's moral judgements and their moral understanding. A virtuous person is a "moral compass". So she will tend not to trust pure moral testimony, though she will be willing to take advice and talk through moral problems since this is an exercise of moral understanding.

If Hills is right, it is a moral ideal to have and to use moral understanding to make your moral judgements. This raises many questions, some of which are discussed in the following section.

2.3.2. Objections

2.3.2.1. Is moral understanding really different from moral knowledge?

It is not very controversial that understanding why p differs from knowledge that p. But many philosophers have thought that understanding why p just is the same as knowledge why p.[11] And even if understanding why p is similar to know-how in some respects, it has been argued that know-how is itself a kind of propositional knowledge.[12]

It is difficult to assess whether moral understanding and moral knowledge differ without specifying in more detail the conception of propositional knowledge at issue, for there are many different conceptions in the literature. But one important factor in this context is the relationship between these two and trusting testimony. Ordinary propositional knowledge can be transmitted straightforwardly by testimony. Even those who argue that know-how is a kind of propositional knowledge accept that it is difficult to transmit it by testimony. So ultimately, the most significant question is as follows: does understanding, as it is outlined here, differ from ordinary propositional knowledge in ways that have implications for trusting testimony, and it is plausible that it does.

2.3.2.2. Can it be epistemically rational to turn down moral knowledge?

If a virtuous person tends to acquire and use moral understanding, and moral understanding is not the same as knowledge, does it follow that she has a moral reason to make her moral judgements in that way but not an epistemic reason? If a virtuous person turns down pure moral testimony and thus turns down moral knowledge, could virtue require you to be epistemically irrational? If, as many have claimed, beliefs "aim" at knowledge, is it even possible to form moral beliefs whilst "aiming" for moral understanding rather than knowledge? These questions have been answered in different ways. Hopkins takes his account (the requirement of a "right" to have a moral belief) as a distinctively moral requirement. But Hills defends the idea that exercised understanding as well as knowledge can be a legitimate epistemic aim, and thus it can be epistemically rational to acquire and exercise moral understanding even if in doing so you forgo knowledge.

2.3.2.3. Should we always aim to be virtuous?

Suppose that a virtuous person would have the right sort of abilities to judge what it is right to do, and she would use them to decide what to do. Having and using moral understanding is a moral ideal. But it is not clear what follows for the rest of us. We are not fully virtuous, do not have full moral understanding and do not always perfectly exercise it. Should we always try to acquire and to use our moral understanding?

This is similar to a familiar debate about how people who have non-virtuous motivations should act. A virtuous person would have one glass of wine only. If you are not temperate, should you attempt the same thing? The most reasonable response is as follows: some people should sometimes because they will be able to moderate their appetites and do the right thing and thereby come closer to attaining the virtue. Others should not because they will simply fail.

It is reasonable to make the same response about those who do not have full moral understanding. Some should try to develop it by exercising the abilities that they do have perhaps with the advice of a virtuous person. For others, it would be better to find someone who can tell them what to do and to do what they are told. It follows that trusting moral testimony is typically less than morally ideal, that is, it is rarely what a virtuous person would do, but it is not always morally unacceptable.

2.3.2.4. Can there be morally worthy action on the basis of testimony?

According to Hills, morally worthy action must be based on the agent's grasp of the reasons why the action is right and thus cannot be based on pure moral testimony. But this is denied by Markovits, who claims that in at least some circumstances, acting on the basis of moral testimony is morally worthy.[13]

Markovits argues that which action it is right for you to do depends on your epistemic state. For instance, if a doctor has good evidence that a particular medicine will be the most

effective, she has good reasons to prescribe that medicine even if it turns out to have unexpected side effects. And if the doctor tells me to take the medicine, I thereby have good reason to do so, and if I choose it on that basis (and have the right sort of motivation), surely I have done the right action for the right reason?

One question that is raised by this is whether we can adequately distinguish between the actions of the doctor (which are sensitive to reasons concerning the efficacy of the treatment and my own (which are sensitive to the doctor's testimony). The doctor has a medical expertise which I lack. And in a similar situation involving moral testimony, it would be natural to say she has a moral expertise which I lack. Hills's account captures this differently; the testifier is (fully) virtuous and her action is morally worthy and mine is not. It is not clear how Markovits could recognise it.

2.3.3. Virtue as "subjective integration"

Howell rejects the "understanding" account of the puzzle of pure moral testimony and develops a different response. He accepts that you can gain knowledge from pure moral testimony but argues that it has a bad effect on moral character.

Virtue is widely regarded as a "multitrack" disposition: a reliable disposition to act and feel in certain ways. Howell emphasises that it is not sufficient to have these dispositions to be virtuous: they must also be integrated with one another and be unified. Virtue requires "subjective integration".

According to Howell, the puzzle of pure moral testimony is explained because someone who based their moral judgement on pure moral testimony would lack the kind of integration needed for virtue. There are several ways in which this might happen.

Suppose that I am told, from someone I trust, that giving a lot of money to the needy is morally right. I do trust them and judge that doing so is morally right. I thereby know that it is morally right, and if I act on that basis, I do the right thing. Howell accepts that there need be nothing wrong with my action. But still, there may be something wrong with me as a person.

First, if I trust testimony instead of making up my own mind, I show that I did not have the appropriate feelings and non-cognitive attitudes to judge for myself. This may indicate that I already lack virtue.

Second, after I have trusted pure moral testimony, I may well know that helping the needy is morally right but fail to be motivated to do so. Certainly, the appropriate motivations are not guaranteed by trusting testimony. In addition, I may fail to have the appropriate "moral intuitions." Most of us "just see" that helping the needy is right, but if you make that judgement on the basis of testimony, you may not "see" anything. Finally, the resulting judgement may be "cognitively isolated" and not part of a coherent and integrated set of beliefs (including beliefs about moral reasons). Because of this lack of integration, I will lack virtue.

However, whilst it is plausible that full virtue does require the kind of integration Howell outlines, it is less clear that trusting testimony could not play a role in eventually achieving this. For instance, it may be possible to make a judgement on the basis of testimony without an accompanying motivation to act. But presumably, the same is true of other ways of making a moral judgement based on "intuition" (you "just see" that helping the needy is right but don't care all that much). And it certainly seems possible to be motivated to act after being told that helping the needy is right. Similarly, although a moral judgement made on the basis of testimony could well be cognitively isolated, first, it certainly need not be. That helping the needy is morally right could fit right in with all my other moral judgements. Second, other ways of forming moral judgements could also be cognitively isolated: I might "just see" that stem cell research is all right without this having anything to do with my other moral judgements.

And finally, putting my trust in a reliable testifier could be a first step towards making true and integrated moral judgements, which are surely essential to virtue. Of course, the integration would have to come later. But why not take the first step and at least have a true moral judgement?

3. Debunking explanations of the puzzle.

According to the puzzle of pure moral testimony, there is something odd about trusting moral testimony even when you could thereby gain knowledge: the puzzle is explaining this oddity. But some have argued that there is nothing to explain. Sliwa, for instance, argues that this apparent oddity can be explained fully without conceding that there is anything wrong with doing so at all.

In the first place, she points out that some of the examples used to illustrate this apparent oddity involve agents who are ignorant about basic moral truths, such as whether it is wrong to kill innocent people or whether it is right to help the needy. This moral ignorance is itself troubling, but there is nothing wrong with them resolving this ignorance through trusting testimony.

Second, some of the examples involve agents trusting testimony about moral questions whose answer is a matter of dispute such as whether eating meat is wrong. It is not reasonable to expect to find a testifier who is reliable on this issue since it is so controversial. Trusting moral testimony is not acceptable here, but this is nothing to do with moral testimony as such: trusting testimony about any controversial question would be equally problematic.

Finally, asking for moral testimony can suggest that an agent has questionable motivations such as that she is trying to avoid responsibility for her actions, or that she wants never to make any decision for herself. If these factors are not present, Sliwa argues, there is nothing wrong with trusting moral testimony, and in fact, it can be an invaluable way of gaining moral knowledge.

Sliwa is no doubt right that these factors explain some of the puzzle of pure moral testimony. But do they fully explain it? That is still a matter of dispute.

4. Conclusion

The topic of moral testimony raises some important questions which have yet to be settled. These include whether there is a difference between moral understanding and moral knowledge; whether moral understanding plays a significant moral role, what it takes to do the right thing for the right reason and what virtue requires in terms of both cognitive and non-cognitive attitudes.

These questions also have wider implications. First, about other kinds of testimony. Is it also odd to trust aesthetic testimony? And if so, is this for the same reason why it is odd to trust moral testimony?

Second, about epistemology. If moral understanding differs from moral knowledge, does understanding differ from knowledge generally, and might it play an important epistemic role?

Short Biography

Alison Hills's research is at the intersection of ethics and epistemology, though she has also worked on Kant's moral philosophy and in practical ethics. She has published papers in journals including *Ethics*, *Philosophical Studies* and *Philosophical Quarterly*, and her book *The Beloved Self* was published by OUP in 2010. She has a PhD from Cambridge University and is now a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St John's College, Oxford.

Notes

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[1] Of course moral testimony can include reasons too, for instance, "it is wrong to eat animals because doing so supports practises of farming that cause too much suffering". This kind of testimony is discussed in Hills (2009, 2010) but the rest of the literature tends to focus on pure moral testimony.

[2] Trusting testimony is one kind of deference to another's judgement. There are others, but I will only talk about trusting testimony here.

[3] Aesthetic testimony is discussed by Robson 2012.

[4] It has been suggested that the puzzle of pure moral testimony is particularly a problem for moral realism. For moral realism is committed to the claim that there are objective moral facts similar to non-moral facts. If knowledge of non-moral facts can be passed on by testimony, why should not knowledge of moral facts too? Some non-realist theories have an easy explanation of why trusting moral testimony is not a good idea. If moral truths are relative to each person or making a moral judgement is merely expressing your own personal attitude, there seems to be no reason in favour of trusting another person's moral judgement. But a more sophisticated non-realist theory, such as a sophisticated form of subjectivism or quasi-realism that licences talk of moral truth and moral knowledge, will also have a problem in explaining why this knowledge cannot be transmitted by pure moral testimony (McGrath 2011, Hills 2011, Sliwa 2012).

[5] Hopkins 2007.

[6] Nickel 2001, McGrath 2011.

[7] Driver 2006, McGrath 2008, 2011, Hopkins 2007, Sliwa 2012

[8] Hopkins 2007.

[9] McGrath 2011, Hills 2009, 2010, 2011.

[10] Though this is denied by Howell (forthcoming), who points out that knowledge why will also require abilities. But even if this is true, it may not require as extensive a set of abilities as understanding why, and if it does, this casts doubt on whether knowledge why can successfully be transmitted by testimony. In addition, it is argued that understanding why is compatible with "epistemic luck" in a way that propositional knowledge, including knowledge why, is not (see Hills 2009, 2010).

[11] For instance, Kitcher (2002), Lipton (2004, p. 30)). See Howell (forthcoming) for this point specifically against Hills.

[12] Stanley and Williamson (2001); Stanley (2011).

[13] Markovits 2012, See also Howell (forthcoming) p. 14.

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