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Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 158, No. 2, PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2011 BELLINGHAM SUMMER PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE (March 2012), pp. 175-195
Published by: Springer
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23262339
Accessed: 16-01-2020 20:55 UTC

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Philos Stud (2012) 158:175–195
DOI 10.1007/s11098-012-9887-6

In defense of moral testimony

Paulina Sliwa

Published online: 22 March 2012
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Moral testimony has been getting a bad name in the recent literature.[1] It has been argued that while testimony is a perfectly fine source for nonmoral belief, there's something wrong with basing one's moral beliefs on it. This paper argues that the bad name is undeserved: Moral testimony isn't any more problematic than nonmoral testimony.[2]

Some people claim that there is something intuitively problematic about deferring to others for one's moral beliefs: there seems to be something valuable about coming to one's moral beliefs by oneself. Hills, argues for example:

> Once you have reached maturity as an adult and have the ability to think about moral questions by yourself [...] you have strong reasons to do so, indeed that refusing to do so is unacceptable.[3]

While children may be in need of moral education and hence should take their parents' word for what's right and wrong, it seems that as adults we shouldn't rely on others for our moral beliefs. Worries about moral testimony are further supported by particular cases, such as this one:

> VEGETARIAN: Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these,

[1] To see that it's been getting a bad name, it's enough to just have a look at the titles. For examples, see Nickel (2001); Hopkins (2007), Hills (2009); Driver (2006), McGrath (2009).

[2] There has been much recent discussion about the epistemology of nonmoral testimony. See Coady (1992) and Lackey (2008). For the purposes of this paper, I am not committing myself to any particular account of the epistemology of testimony. My argument is just that moral testimony does not differ from nonmoral testimony—whatever the right account of the latter turns out to be.

[3] Hills (2009, p. 95).

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> however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.[4]

Eleanor's behavior seems disturbing. We can imagine even more disturbing cases:

> SUIT: Sam is standing at the shore of a lake when he sees a drowning child. He believes that saving the child would be a good thing to do but it would involve ruining his new expensive suit. He cannot decide what to do and there is no one else at the lake, so he decides to call a friend whom he takes to be reliable. His friend tells him that he should save the child, and he believes him and saves the child.

Why are these cases so troubling? Some suggest that what makes these cases peculiar is that they are instances of *moral* testimony. They argue that, were Eleanor to ask her friend about some nonmoral question, this wouldn't be troubling at all. We should hence conclude that there is a general problem about moral testimony. In particular, what explains that the cases are disturbing is a principle like:

> NO TESTIMONY: For a mature moral agent, there is something wrong with relying on testimony for one's moral beliefs even if one knows one's source to be reliable and trustworthy.

If something like NO TESTIMONY is right, this has implications for both moral epistemology and meta-ethics. Some take the asymmetry between moral and nonmoral testimony as evidence that what matters in moral epistemology is not moral knowledge but rather moral understanding.[5] Others suggest that an asymmetry between moral and nonmoral testimony has far-reaching consequences for meta-ethics. In particular, they argue, if moral testimony turns out to be problematic, this can be used as an argument against moral realism in support of non-cognitivist views.

> After all, when it comes to deep and unobvious facts about the empirical world, we readily defer to others [...] who are better placed to discover those facts than we are. In such cases, even a very sweeping kind of deference to expert opinion seems appropriate. If, similarly, there is a domain of deep and unobvious moral facts, then it is natural to expect that some of us—intuitively, the "moral experts"—would be better placed to discover these facts than others. In principle then, moral deference should strike us as no more peculiar than deference about scientific matters or geography.[6,7]

[4] Hills (2009, p. 94).

[5] See Hills (2009).

[6] McGrath (2011, p. 12).

[7] Since I argue that there is no asymmery between moral and nonmoral testimony, I do not think that there is a special problem for moral realist. But even if there were an asymmetry, this would create a puzzle for moral realists and plausible non-cognitivist views alike. While emotivists have an easy explanation for why moral testimony is troubling, these views are implausible because they cannot account for moral disagreement. More sophisticated views of disagreement, such as Gibbard's norm-

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According to moral realist views, moral facts are no different from non-moral facts, the burden is on the moral realist to provide an explanation for any epistemic asymmetry.

The goal of this paper is to show that there is no general problem about moral testimony; in fact, moral testimony is no more problematic than nonmoral testimony. My strategy is as follows: in Sect. 1, I give a direct argument that No testimony is false. Then, in Sect. 2, I defend this argument against an objection. In Sect. 3, I revisit the initial cases that motivated worries about moral testimony and provide a better diagnosis of what goes wrong in them. I show that in these cases the agent's reliance on moral testimony isn't the culprit—rather, the culprit is moral ignorance, controversy, or ulterior motives. Finally, I consider two attempts to spell out and defend No testimony. According to the first, moral testimony is epistemically problematic because it doesn't give us moral knowledge. According to the second, moral testimony is morally problematic because it's incompatible with morally worthy actions. I argue that neither of these attempts succeeds. Thus, there is no asymmetry between moral and nonmoral testimony.

1 The argument from moral advice

The initial cases that have motivated No testimony are very peculiar, and they suggest that moral testimony is an unusual and exotic phenomenon. But relying on others for our moral beliefs isn't exotic. It's something all of us do by asking for and taking moral advice and it's something we do for good reasons. To get a better picture of the role of moral testimony, it's therefore important to look at a wider range of cases. In this section I will therefore look at some mundane cases in which agents rely on moral advice. I will argue that these cases are intuitively unproblematic and that the agent's reliance on moral advice is a good thing. But, I will argue, there is no difference between relying on moral advice and relying on moral testimony. So any general principle like No testimony must be false.

I want to start with some fairly ordinary cases of moral advice.

> Wedding: Tom and Sara are planning a wedding and both of their families have offered to contribute money towards it. Sara's family, which is less wealthy than Tom's, offered a certain sum, which will cover less than half of the expenses. The couple is now wondering whether it would be permissible for them to ask Tom's family (which is wealthier) for a greater contribution. In particular, they worry that it wouldn't be fair of them to ask one set of parents for more. They decide to ask a friend whose judgment they trust.

Footnote 7 continued
expressivism, on the other hand, do not have an explanation of the asymmetry readily at hand. In fact, some of these views explicitly grant that we can rely on others for our moral norms. Gibbard (1990), for example, writes: "When conditions are right and someone else finds a norm independently credible, I must take that as favoring my own accepting the norm." (p. 180). In general, it seems that any non-cognitivist view that makes room for moral disagreement, does not have an easy explanation for a deep asymmetry between moral and nonmoral testimony.

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TRIP: Anna is a journalist who is preparing to go on a reporting trip to a dangerous and conflict-ridden area. She has to tell her family that she will be away but she really doesn't know what to tell them. If she tells them where exactly she's going and why, they will be extremely worried. On the other hand, she worries that by evading the questions she would be lying. She goes back and forth but cannot decide what the right thing to do is and eventually decides to ask a friend whose judgment she trusts.
FRIENDS: Susan's friends have been playing pranks on a new girl in her class. Susan worries that they might be going too far and that they are bullying the girl. But when she talks to them, they insist that they are just teasing her. Susan doesn't know what to do. If her friends are being bullies, she should step in. But they are her friends and she doesn't want to get them in trouble and she's not quite sure whether what they are doing *is* bullying. Eventually, she decides to ask a friend for advice.

Intuitively, there isn't anything wrong or disturbing about these cases. In all of them, it seems fine for the agent to rely on their friends' judgments and to take their friends' advice. You might worry that in these cases, the agents aren't really relying on someone else's moral judgment. After all, "fairness", "lying" and "bullying" are thick terms, so you might be worried that in asking for advice, the agents aren't really asking for any moral information. Now, it does seem true that not all instances of apparent moral advice really do involve a request for moral information. When asking their friend "Would it be okay for us to ask Tom's parents for a greater contribution?" the couple might just be unsure about how Tom's parents would react to the proposal. They might not be so much worried about whether asking more of Tom's parents really is fair, but rather whether Tom's parents would think that it's fair. And in this case, they aren't relying on their friend's moral judgment but rather on her psychological acuity. Suppose that their friend tells them, "Don't do this, Tom's parents will be upset", and they accept that they shouldn't do it. They might be just relying on their friend for the belief that Tom's parents would be upset and use this nonmoral information to make their own moral judgment.

However, it seems clear that not all requests for moral advice are just requests for psychological information in disguise. We are sometimes uncertain about what the right thing to do is, not because we lack nonmoral information, but because we are genuinely uncertain about the moral status of the action or the situation. In particular, we can imagine that Tom and Sara have a very good idea about how Tom's parents would react to their request and they know that they would be happy to contribute a greater part. But even so, Tom and Sara might still be unsure whether it would be reasonable to ask them to do so. Similarly, Anna might know that her family will be terribly upset if she keeps quiet about the nature of her trip and they will accuse her of having lied should they find out. Nevertheless, she might be unsure whether they would be justified in their accusations. That's because she is unsure about whether what she contemplates doing really does amount to a lie. And finally, Susan might be aware of the psychological effects that her friends' behavior has on the girl but she might still be unsure if what they're doing really is bullying

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as opposed to just teasing. So, in taking someone's moral advice, we are really relying on their moral judgment. And in the cases I considered, this seems like a good thing.

Why can taking someone's moral advice be a good thing? In relying on someone else's moral judgment, we acknowledge that the other person is in a better epistemic position with respect to the particular moral judgment than we are. And we can have excellent reasons for doing so. Why should we take someone else to be better placed to make a given moral judgment? There are at least two good reasons for doing so: For one, we might be concerned that our own judgment is compromised by bias or self-interest. Secondly, we might think that the other person is just better at making certain moral judgments than we are.

Worries about bias are an important motivation for seeking out moral advice. Figuring out what the right thing to do is often requires us to take an impartial perspective on our action and to bracket morally irrelevant factors in our moral reasoning. But that's not easy. It's hard to know whether or not on a given occasion our reasoning is being influenced by morally irrelevant factors. And even when we suspect that our reasoning is infected by biases, it's hard to know the extent to which this has happened. So, even if we do realize that our reasoning is biased, we may still not be in a position to fix it. In situations like this, we should rely on moral advice. We should rely on the judgment of someone who isn't subject to our biases. Thus, in FRIENDS, Susan might worry that she's not reliable in judging whether the girl is being bullied because it's her friends who are involved. After all, we're less likely to judge our friends harshly and more likely to make up excuses for their behavior. But just knowing this may not help her do better. In fact, if she tries to compensate for the bias, she might even err too much on the side of caution and end up overreacting to even harmless jokes. Thus, asking for advice is he best she can do.

Similarly, in WEDDING, Sara and Tom might worry that their own interests can influence their judgment of whether it's fair to ask Tom's family for the greater contribution. After all, if the combined contribution of their parents doesn't amount to the full cost of the wedding, they will either have to pay the rest out of their own (slim) pockets or they will have to change their plans to cut some costs. So it's in their own interest to think that it would be fair to ask Tom's parents for a greater contribution. Moral judgments often either require us to set our own interests and preferences aside or they require us to weigh self-interested reasons against the interests of others. In such cases, we seek out moral advice because we don't trust our own moral judgment. We take the other person to be in a better epistemic position because they don't share our interests and hence cannot be biased by them.

But we don't just seek out moral advice because we think that our own moral judgment might be compromised. We may rely on someone's moral advice because we believe that they are better at making certain kinds of moral distinctions. We may think that the other person is more sensitive to a given moral norm than we are. This is because seeing whether a given moral norm applies is often a matter of ability. It involves practical knowledge, not just theoretical knowledge. Practical knowledge comes in degrees: For example, some people can just be better at seeing

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whether some situation is unfair than others. They have finer discriminatory skills and can distinguish situations that aren't obvious to others.[8]

To see what I have in mind, consider a case of social norms:

> RUDE: Anna shares the social norm against rudeness and she is trying hard to be polite, but she cannot always tell whether her tone of voice, her behavior or an email she is writing is rude. She worries about this because she doesn't want to be rude. Therefore, whenever, she is uncertain, she relies on her friend's judgement.

It doesn't seem mysterious how Anna could come to believe that her friend is a better judge of rudeness than herself. After all, it's not that Anna lacks the concept of "rude". It's just that her ability to discriminate is rather coarse. Her friend, on the other hand, has finer discriminatory skills. The tone of two emails can look very much the same to Anna, when one of them strikes her friend as clearly more polite than the other. And it's not just that her friend is better at psychological judgments. After all, whether, for example, an email is rude isn't just a matter of whether the recipient will be offended by it. It's a matter of whether the other person is reasonably offended by it. Anna, therefore relies on her friend whenever she suspects that finer discriminatory skills are needed. She trusts her friend's judgments that the tone of an email is rude even if she antecedently didn't think so herself. Anna's predicament doesn't seem unusual. It is clear that some people are just better at applying social norms than others. But then it's plausible that something similar could hold for moral norms, too. Just as Anna could come to believe that her friend is in a better epistemic position to make judgments about rudeness, so we can sometimes come to believe that someone else is better at judging whether a given moral norm applies.

What could make one person more competent with a particular moral norm than others? If, for example, seeing that a situation is unfair is an ability, a form of practical knowledge, then practice and experience matters. Learning to apply a given moral concept may be a lot like learning how to read an X-ray. You have to have seen a whole bunch of them to learn to distinguish the white blotches and patterns that are just artifacts from the ones that are evidence for disease. And the more experience you have, the better you become at distinguishing the tricky cases. Similarly, learning how to distinguish situations in which someone is being treated fairly from the ones where she's being treated unfairly, you may have just had to experience a number of such cases.

The fact that we have different backgrounds means that some of us get to practice applying some moral concepts and making certain moral distinctions more than others. Someone who grew up with many siblings may be more sensitive to considerations of fairness than someone who grew up as a single child. A student

[8] You might worry that in all the unproblematic cases of moral testimony so far, the agent takes on someone else's say-so that a moral norm they already accept applies. Hence, you might worry that I haven't shown that we can acquire a new norm on the basis of moral testimony. I address this worry in the next section. There I show that insofar as accepting a new norm on the basis of testimony seems problematic, it's not testimony that is to blame. Independently of this, I am skeptical that we can draw a sharp distinction between learning how to apply a norm and accepting a norm, in the first place.

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from a minority group may be more sensitive to whether a given remark is racist than her white peers. Thus, even if they believe that racism is wrong, her peers may still want to defer to her whether some particular joke is racist or merely distasteful. Similarly, one may want to defer to one's female friends whether some particular remark is sexist, even if one is fully committed to combat sexism.[9] Of course, there is no easy route from background to competence with a given moral norm. The mere fact that someone grew up in a large family, doesn't guarantee that they will be better judges of fairness just as being a woman doesn't guarantee that someone will be a good judge of sexism—she might see sexist remarks where there are none. But it still seems plausible that some backgrounds can make a person more reliable in applying some particular moral norm.

If making some moral distinctions is in fact a matter of practical knowledge, this gives us a further reason to seek out advice from someone whom we regard as better at them than we are. Not only will it help us to do the right thing but it might help us become better at making the distinctions ourselves. If you're learning how to read an X-ray, you do well in asking your more experienced supervisor for advice in cases in which you are unsure. Similarly, in relying on her friend, Anna might actually get better at recognizing rudeness herself. And trusting one's female friend's judgments about sexist remarks, might help one learn how to make that distinction oneself.

I have argued that moral advice is a good thing for two reasons: It's morally good because it helps us do the right thing in cases in which we might otherwise fail to do so. And it's epistemically good because it allows us to take advantage of our peers who may be epistemically better placed to make certain moral distinction and to come to the right moral conclusion. In short, we ask for and rely on moral advice because we're in many respects creatures who make mistakes, who get distracted, who are susceptible to biases, who have limited abilities of discrimination in some areas and who are, moreover, well aware of all that. Moral advice allows us to do the right thing despite all these limitations by tapping into the cognitive resources of our peers.

Note that we rely on nonmoral advice for exactly the same reasons. Imagine a doctor asking her colleague for advice for help in making a diagnosis on the basis of an X-ray. She might be requesting help because of concerns about bias: The patient is her friend and she worries that this might influence her judgment, since she really hopes that her friend is healthy. Or she might be worried about not having enough experience to interpret correctly the result—she just hasn't had much practice looking at this particular kind of picture. Or she might just think that she's overworked and sleep deprived and therefore doesn't quite trust her own medical judgments. In taking medical advice from her colleague, the doctor relies on testimony. She accepts a belief on her colleague's say-so because she takes her colleague to be more reliable than herself. Just in the same way, the instances of moral advice that I discussed above involve moral testimony: In taking someone's

[9] The central example in Jones (1999) is also of this kind. In the example, Jones argues, Peter ought to defer to his (female) roommates' judgments of sexism. Jones uses this example to argue for a narrower conclusion than I do. I argue that in general there isn't anything wrong with relying on moral testimony, not just that in some particular instances there isn't.

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moral advice, you often accept a moral belief on the basis of their say-so. (I will defend this claim further in the next section.) It seems clear that in taking medical advice, the doctor isn't doing anything wrong. Similarly, it seems clear that in the situations I described above, there isn't anything wrong with taking your friend's moral advice. But if there isn't anything wrong with taking moral advice and there is no difference between taking moral advice and accepting moral testimony, then No TESTIMONY must be false. There isn't anything particularly problematic about relying on others for your moral belief.

2 Is moral advice just moral testimony?

I have argued that there are many instances of moral testimony in the form of moral advice that are unproblematic. Therefore, No TESTIMONY must be false: there is no general problem about moral testimony just as there is no general problem about nonmoral testimony. In this section I respond to an objection to my argument. According to Hills, moral advice and moral testimony are distinct and importantly different. Hence, the fact that moral advice is unproblematic doesn't establish that moral testimony is.

How, according to Hills, does moral testimony differ from moral advice? Hills argues that the two differ in that, in taking moral testimony,

> ...you simply believe what is said to you. You make no attempt to gather the reasons why p and draw conclusions yourself, or to devise explanations for moral propositions that you have accepted. You simply believe what you are told.

According to Hills, once you have determined that the speaker is reliable

> ...you simply trust what she says without exercising your own judgement on that particular matter. In this case, you are relying on the judgement of other people.

In contrast, in taking moral advice you don't just "believe what is said to you." Rather,

> you subject [the testimony] to critical scrutiny and you decide whether or not to accept on its own merits. You take into account what others have said to you as a guide to your own reflections.[10]

But this distinction between moral testimony and moral advice is not plausible and it doesn't track the distinction between problematic and unproblematic cases. For one, there are cases of moral testimony which are unproblematic but which do not involve treating the testimony merely as a guide to one's own reflections. I gave several examples of such cases above. In these examples, the agents rely on moral advice because they want to do the right thing, but they either worry about the

[10] Hills (2009, p. 122–123).

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reliability of their own moral reasoning or they think that someone else is better at making certain moral judgments than they are. In both cases, the testimony plays a much more substantial role than just "guiding reflection", yet the agent doesn't seem to be doing anything wrong in relying on it. Would it be better if the agents did engage in further critical deliberation? No, in fact, it seems that in cases like these, further deliberation after receiving the testimony may be exactly what the agent shouldn't do. After all, if the agent is worried about her moral judgment being biased, there is no guarantee that her further deliberation won't be biased or overly impressed with her self-interested reasons as well. And once she starts reflecting further, she opens the way to succumbing to temptation and rationalizing the testimony away. In these situations further reflection may just be an invitation to fall prey to weakness of will.[11] What about the case in which the agent takes moral advice because she thinks that her friend is better at making the relevant moral distinctions? In these cases, too it's not clear why critical deliberation would be called for because it's not clear how critical deliberation could help. Moral advice is so useful precisely because it's a means to put an end to one's reflections about what the right thing to do is.

Thus, there are plenty of instances of moral advice which don't just involve treating moral testimony as a guide to one's own reflection and in which nevertheless the agent doesn't do anything wrong. On the other hand, however, testimony, both moral and nonmoral, does often involve more critical reflection than Hills' account seems to suggest. In fact, without further reflection, reliance on testimony might not be epistemically rational. To see why, it's helpful to consider an extreme, nonmoral case. Suppose I go to the doctor, whom I take to be reliable and trustworthy, to ask him what to take for my headache. The doctor tells me that my headache could be cured by taking a generous spoonful of cyanide. Now, even if prior to his testimony, I regarded the doctor as reliable and trustworthy, I would be epistemically irrational (and most likely dead) if I "simply believed what was said" to me. That's because even reliable testimony is in general just one piece of evidence that I have. In this case, I have other evidence about headaches and the likely effects of cyanide. What I need to do is to weigh the evidence from testimony against all the other non-testimonial evidence that I have. That requires critical reflection about the testimony itself. Even in cases in which a speaker's testimony is the only evidence I have about some question, epistemic rationality may still require me to think about the plausibility of what I have been told. After all, even someone who's usually reliable and trustworthy can be tired or drugged or joking on that particular occasion. Asking "What makes you think so?" is an easy way to check whether the speaker has really thought the problem through, whether she really has got your question right and to rule out that she's not just trying to get rid of us, or joking or drunk. That's why we often don't just simply believe as we're told without any further questions and that's why scenarios in which the agent doesn't do so may seem intuitively odd.[12]

[11] See Holton (2010).

[12] See Christensen (2007).

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Trying to draw a distinction between advice and testimony by taking one but not the other to involve critical reflection seems wrong-headed in both moral and non-moral cases. In testimony there is sometimes quite a bit of critical deliberation, as when you convince yourself that the doctor really knows what he's doing when he is suggesting you take cyanide for your headache. Taking advice sometimes involves very little, for example when you don't trust your own judgment on the particular question. And there are plenty of cases in between, depending on whether you ask for advice because you need to put an end to your reflection and come to a decision, whether you are asking for advice because you want some help with thinking through the problem, and depending on just how much help you want. Moral advice and moral testimony aren't fundamentally different. Rather, moral advice just is a subclass of moral testimony. It's testimony about practical questions: questions about whether we ought to do something, whether it would be a good thing for us to do it, or what a good way of doing something is. Since many moral questions are practical questions, questions about what we should do, much of moral testimony takes the form of moral advice.[13]

3 Ignorance, disagreement and ulterior motives

I have argued that there are plenty of unproblematic cases of moral testimony, so we should reject the principle No testimony. But what about the initial cases, such as Suit and Vegetarian, that motivated No testimony? I agree that these cases are problematic. But, I will argue in this section, they aren't problematic because of any general problem with moral testimony. I will isolate three things that can go wrong when an agent asks for moral testimony. I will argue that these factors can explain our intuitive unease about the problematic scenarios. But they don't show that there is anything wrong with moral testimony per se. In particular, I will argue, these factors can make cases of nonmoral testimony just as problematic.

3.1 Moral ignorance

In general, we ask for moral advice because we don't know what the right thing to do is. Testimony is primarily a means for sharing information and resolving ignorance. The request for moral testimony is then evidence for an agent's moral ignorance. Moral ignorance is complicated: there are many reasons why an agent can fail to know what the right thing to do is. I will argue that it's the moral ignorance of an agent that drives our intuitions in some of the more troubling cases of moral testimony. What our intuitions are latching onto in these cases isn't that the agent is resolving her moral ignorance by relying on testimony, but rather that she is morally ignorant in the first place. Some instances of moral ignorance are just problematic in and of themselves. But, I argue that once we're clear on the fact that it's the ignorance that's problematic, we will see that there isn't any further problem

[13] For example, advice is often presented in the form: "Here's what I think..." In giving advice, the speaker hence often doesn't speak as authoritatively as when she is testifying.

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about resolving the ignorance by testimony. On the contrary, in some of the most problematic cases of moral ignorance that's exactly what the agent should do.

Recall one of the initial cases:

> Suit: Sam is standing at the shore of a lake when he sees a child beginning to drown. He believes that saving the child would be a good thing to do but it would involve ruining his new expensive suit. He cannot decide what to do and there is no one else at the lake, so he decides to call a friend whom he takes to be reliable. His friend tells him that he should save the child, and he believes him and saves the child.

This request for testimony doesn't just seem odd—it seems outright bizarre. There must be something very wrong with Sam if he cannot see that saving the life of a child outweighs saving one's expensive suit. Or consider the following:

> Ron, the extremist, would like to kill Tamara because he is angry at her but he isn't sure whether that's morally permissible. He decides to ask his Rabbi what the right thing to do is. The Rabbi tells him that he mustn't kill Tamara and Ron believes him.[14]

Again, the fact that one mustn't kill someone just because one is angry with them is an obvious moral truth. It's not exactly moral rocket science. To be ignorant of such basic moral truths, one's sensitivity to moral reasons must be seriously compromised. At the same time however, these agents aren't outright bad. They aren't psychopaths who have no concern for morality whatsoever. They are motivated to do the right thing, they're just very bad at figuring out what the right thing is. But again, the fact that they are bad at figuring this out doesn't escape them. They do worry about getting it wrong and it's for that reason that they ask for moral advice.

What's troubling then about these cases is the agents' ignorance of basic moral truths. But are they in addition doing something wrong by relying on moral testimony for their beliefs? This just doesn't seem plausible at all. For one, it's just not clear what a better alternative would be. After all, left to their own devices, these agents are likely to come to the wrong conclusions and make terrible moral mistakes. So relying on testimony is exactly what they should do. We might worry that someone who is so insensitive to moral facts might also be no good at recognizing people who are reliable in their moral judgments. But even if they aren't terribly good at assessing the reliability of other people's judgment, they can still rely on moral testimony since almost anyone is in a better position to make moral judgments than they are. Their situation is rather like someone's who suffers from severe colorblindness and must therefore rely on others for accurate color judgments. Even though such a person isn't well posed to evaluate other people's reliability about color judgments, her reliance on testimony isn't problematic. That's because almost anyone's color vision is better than hers.

I argued that what makes some of these extreme cases of testimony problematic isn't the testimony but rather the ignorance that motivates the request for it. And it

[14] A similar case appears in Hills (2009).

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seems that this isn't any special feature of moral testimony, nor is it a special feature of moral ignorance. Nonmoral ignorance can be problematic and when it is it can make cases of nonmoral testimony look intuitively odd, too. Consider the following:

> Mark, a sexist, believes that women are less intelligent than men. He comes across plenty of conclusive evidence that this is not so—in his college classes there are plenty of women who are smart, the valedictorian in his year is a woman, etc. The conclusive evidence doesn't manage to convince him of the contrary but he does undermine his confidence a bit and he decides to consult a (male) friend whom he takes to be reliable and trustworthy. His friend tells him that women aren't less intelligent than men and Mark believes him.
>
> Or
>
> Susan is wondering whether sense perception is a reliable source of belief. She decides to ask a friend whose judgement she trusts. Her friend tells her that sense perception is reliable, so she believes him.

These cases look odd. It's not that there is a general principle prohibiting one to ask how women perform on IQ tests. But in this case Mark shouldn't have to ask. He doesn't know that women aren't any less intelligent than men because he's a sexist. So even though his uncertainty is about an empirical claim, his ignorance is problematic. Were he not in the grip of his sexism, the facts would be immediately obvious to him. His sexism makes him insensitive to the evidence. Susan's case also seems very strange: It's just odd that a reasonable person would be genuinely uncertain about whether their sense perception is a reliable source of belief. Susan has clearly overdosed on some of the skepticism literature and has lost touch with reality. Now, even though these cases are odd, they wouldn't lead us to conclude that there is something problematic about nonmoral testimony. But then we shouldn't be tempted to draw this conclusion in the moral case either.

3.2 Controversy

Consider the other initial case that motivated No testimony:

> Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.

Eleanor is uncertain whether eating meat is morally permissible. But her ignorance doesn't seem to be what's problematic in this case. After all, the question of whether it is permissible to eat meat isn't quite as straightforward as the question whether one should save a drowning child or whether one may kill someone with whom one is angry. It is a question that is subject to much controversy. And it's a complex issue: It involves questions about the moral status and rights of animals, about farming practices, about the environmental impact of animal farming, and the impact of your eating habits. A lot of intelligent people, who are concerned about

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doing the right thing have thought hard about the issue and nevertheless come to different conclusions. All this makes it hard to see why there should be something wrong with someone who's aware that eating meat may be morally problematic and just isn't sure how to weight those issues. And presumably, that's the situation that Eleanor finds herself in: She realizes that there are moral problems with eating meat but she's unsure what to conclude. The ignorance is a consequence of the question being hard rather than of some serious defect on Eleanor's part. Insofar as this scenario is problematic, moral ignorance doesn't seem to be the culprit.

The problem in this case has to do with Eleanor's resolving her moral ignorance by testimony. In particular, it's precisely those factors that make Eleanor's ignorance unproblematic that rule out testimony as a means to resolving her ignorance. The question whether it's wrong to eat meat is a controversial question: it's something even intelligent, well-informed and thoughtful people disagree on. But given that there is so much disagreement about the issue at hand, testimony just isn't a reliable source of moral belief. That's because Eleanor cannot expect an arbitrary friend, even if she is generally reliable, to be reliable on this particular issue. The friend whom Eleanor asks happens to believe that eating meat is wrong. But there are plenty of reasonable, trustworthy and generally reliable people out there who believe otherwise and had Eleanor happened to ask any of those, she would have ended up with the opposite belief.[15]

Again, this isn't specific to moral testimony. Take the following case:

> You have bought what you took to be a real Monet for what you thought was a very good price but now that you have hung the picture up in your living room, you are wracked by doubts about its authenticity. You decide to consult the experts and it turns out that your painting has been subject to a lot of controversy. Some distinguished experts insist that it's indeed a real Monet while others argue that it's a fraud. The debate has been raging for some time and both sides have pointed to evidence to support their view.

Can you rely on testimony by one of the experts to resolve your uncertainty about whether your painting is real or a fake? It seems obvious that you can't. This is a controversial question. Much as you'd like to sleep in peace, you can't just go with one of the sides. Clearly, in this case, the fact that the authenticity of your painting is controversial and you're not in a position to ascertain which of the purported experts has it right doesn't establish that there are no art experts or that you are never justified in trusting one. It's just that you cannot trust their testimony on controversial questions because you have no means to identify who is right in these cases. Similarly, the problem with Eleanor's reliance on moral testimony about Vegetarianism isn't a general problem about ascertaining moral reliability. Rather, the problem is that Eleanor isn't in a position to identify who is right about the particular question of whether she ought to eat meat. She has no means of figuring out who got it right not because it's a moral question but because it's a controversial

[15] This also explains why it would be epistemically problematic to accept many moral norms on the basis of moral testimony. If, for example, you became a consequentialist on the basis of moral testimony, your belief would not be justified.

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question. It doesn't imply that moral testimony is problematic. It's just a consequence of the principle that testimony is not a reliable source of belief about questions that are controversial–a principle that rules out some cases of moral and nonmoral testimony alike.

3.3 Ulterior motives

Finally, there is a third factor that can explain our intuitive discomfort with some requests for moral testimony. In all the cases of testimony that I have focused on so far, the agent who asks for advice is motivated by her desire to do the right thing and her uncertainty about what this is. But not all requests of testimony are motivated by the desire to do what's right. Sometimes there are ulterior motives at work. Consider the following case:

> Whenever she has to make any hard moral decisions, Susan always asks her mother for advice. When it then turns out that she has made the wrong choice, Susan immediately blames it on her mother, saying that she only acted this way because her mother told her to.

Here, Susan isn't requesting moral advice because she wants to do the right thing and she's uncertain what that is. In fact, even though it may look that way, Susan isn't really asking for moral advice at all. She's not relying on her mother to resolve her moral uncertainty. Rather, she is asking her mother to make the decision she faces for her. And she's not doing so out of concern for doing what's right. She just wants to blame someone else in case something goes wrong. She is trying to avoid responsibility for her actions.

Or consider again vegetarian:

> Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.

And suppose we fill in some more background: Eleanor is an extremely self-conscious teenager who is trying as hard as she can to fit in with her peers. She is mortified at the mere thought of saying or doing anything that would make her stand out. With this additional information, it becomes plausible that what motivates Eleanor to ask her friend about whether or not she should be a vegetarian is her desire to conform to her peers rather than her concern for doing the right thing. It may look like she is asking for moral advice, but she isn't really: she's interested in whether her friends think it's wrong to eat meat not whether it actually is wrong. Just like Susan in the case before, Eleanor is asking for someone else to make a decision for her and she's motivated by considerations other than concern for doing what's right. What Susan and Eleanor are doing is clearly problematic. It's problematic because they are relying on other people to make their decisions for them. But the cases aren't problematic because they involve moral testimony. In fact it's easy to imagine cases which involve nonmoral testimony:

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> John is working in a big lab. He has a big ego and he is very worried about making a mistake and displeasing his supervisor. He therefore doesn't even attempt to interpret the experimental data by himself. Rather he completely relies on his lab partner. When a mistake happens he immediately blames him.

John's deference to his lab partner is no less troublesome than Susan's or Eleanor's even though it isn't deference about a moral proposition. It's problematic because he is relying on his lab partner for making decisions for him, so that he doesn't have to take responsibility for his actions.

Consider yet a different case:

> Maria is very timid and has absolutely no self-confidence. She thinks that she can never do anything right. Whenever something she does turns out badly, she chastises herself and takes this as evidence that she's stupid and no good. When it does turn out well, she thinks that she just got lucky. One day, she decides to just give up. Henceforth, she relies on her husband for all her moral decisions and she completely defers to him.

This case, too, is very troubling. Maria is completely reliant on her husband—not just for moral testimony but for her decisions. She isn't taking her husband's advice; rather, she is using him to decide for her what to do. But unlike in the previous cases she isn't doing this out of a desire to avoid the consequences of her action but because she lacks self-worth. Maria's autonomy is compromised. She seems to have given up as an agent. So again, what's problematic about this case isn't moral testimony. In fact, the case seems equally problematic, if we imagine Maria deferring to her husband on all kinds of nonmoral matters: On how to dress, what to eat, how to stay healthy. These cases then may look like instances of testimony but they shouldn't really be classified as such—unlike in testimony, the agents here are using other people to make their decisions for them rather than relying on them for belief, so they can decide on their own.

4 Defending No Testimony: moral expertise and moral worth

In this section, I consider two attempts to defend No testimony. The first defends an epistemic version of No testimony, according to which moral testimony is problematic because it cannot give us moral knowledge. According to the second attempt, moral testimony is morally problematic because relying on testimony is incompatible with an agent's actions having full moral worth.

4.1 Moral expertise

Some people have argued that there are epistemic reasons to worry about moral testimony. In particular, some argue that in order to be in a position to rely on testimony, one must be in a position to identify experts. But, according to this view, moral expertise is problematic: even if moral experts exist, it's hard to see how we could identify them. Why think that there is something especially problematic about

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moral expertise? McGrath suggests that we identify experts by asking them controversial questions and checking whether they give the right answer. However, we can't do this in the moral case, since we have no independent access to moral facts:

> By contrast [with nonmoral judgment], there seems to be no analogous way to calibrate the accuracy or reliability of someone's moral judgment, because one lacks the relevant kind of independent access to the moral facts. If one attempted to rank others with respect to the accuracy of their moral judgment by checking how often they answered controversial moral questions correctly, it seems as though one could do so only by engaging in first-order moral reasoning and deliberation of one's own. It is thus unsurprising that clear and unequivocal evidence that someone possess unusually reliable moral judgment is hard to come by. Even if there are genuine moral experts, locating particular individuals within the space of moral expertise is undoubtedly a precarious business.[16]

I will argue that the proposal is not a good method for identifying any kind of experts, moral or nonmoral. I will then argue that the absence of an "independent check" cannot explain why it's supposed to be problematic to rely on moral testimony. Moreover, we don't need an "independent check" in order to rely on testimony. If we did, this would impugn much of nonmoral testimony, too. Finally, I will show that if expertise is required for testimony, it's only a very weak kind of expertise. To be justified in taking someone's word on some question, at most you need to have to believe that the other person is reliable on this particular question. I argue that we easily can have such reasons.

Asking controversial questions is not a plausible proposal for identifying experts of any kind. Suppose you were trying to figure out whether you should trust your doctor about which headache medication to take. According to McGrath, what you have to do is to establish your doctor's medical expertise. And the way you go about establish your doctor's medical expertise, on McGrath's view, is by asking her a number of controversial medical question—so maybe you'd have to ask your doctor about the cure for cancer or whether allergies are caused by environmental pollution–and see whether she answers them correctly. But, of course this isn't a test that you are in a position to carry out and, importantly, this is not just for the lack of medical background and training. In fact, if what it takes to identify a medical expert is to see whether or not she answers controversial medical questions correctly, then it seems that no one is in a position to identify medical expertise. That's because it's in the nature of controversial medical questions that even people with the requisite training and experience don't know what the correct answers to them are. If it were possible to just check who answered a controversial question correctly, it wouldn't be a controversial question.

[16] In her (2009) McGrath argues that our inability to identify experts accounts for the asymmetry between moral and nonmoral testimony. Later, in her (2011), she argues that it's only part of what makes moral testimony is especially problematic—the full explanation also involves the problem of morally worthy actions on the basis of testimony.

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The requirement of an "independent check" in order to determine expertise is problematic. Recall that what we wanted to explain is why it seems that an agent should come to her own moral conclusions, rather than rely on others for her moral beliefs. But if what makes moral testimony epistemically problematic is the lack of an "independent check," then it's hard to see why it would be any better for an agent to rely on her own judgment rather than on that of her friend's. After all, the lack of an "independent check" doesn't just preclude her from assessing other people's reliability. It also makes it impossible to assess her own reliability—she is no more in a position to check whether she herself got it right than she is in a position to check whether someone else got it right. Hence, relying on others or relying on herself are epistemically on a par. Thus the fact that we don't have an "independent check" for moral truths, cannot explain why relying on moral testimony, rather than on one's own judgment, is epistemically suspect.

More importantly, it's simply implausible that we should need an "independent check" in order to be able to rely on testimony. I can rely on other's testimony about what they saw and heard. But I am not in a position to assess the reliability of their perceptual faculties without relying on any deliverances of my own senses, just as I cannot assess someone's moral judgments without relying on moral reasoning of my own. Similarly, I can rely on someone's mathematical testimony. But I don't have "independent access" to mathematical facts and the only way I can asses your reliability is by relying on my own mathematical reasoning or the mathematical reasoning of others' whom I trust.

Thus, in order to be epistemically justified in relying on someone's testimony in some domain, you need neither establish that they can correctly answer controversial questions in that domain, nor do you need to have "independent access" to facts in this domain. You need to have reason to believe that the other person is reliable on this particular issue at hand. It's not hard to see how you could come to have such a justified belief. As I have shown earlier, you could easily have good reason to believe that the other person is more reliable than you are with respect to some moral question, either because you think that your own judgment is impaired in this particular case or because you have reason to think that the other person is better at making the particular moral distinction at hand. Maybe you have seen the person make good moral judgments before and you know that they have thought about the issue at hand. Or maybe they have been recommended to you as a good advisor by someone whose judgment you trust. Maybe you have asked them some related moral questions and seen that they give reasonable answers. None of this is very different from how you are justified in relying on others' for nonmoral testimony.[17]

4.2 Moral worth

I want to consider one final attempt to defend No Testimony: moral testimony is morally problematic because it's incompatible with morally worthy actions. On recent accounts of moral worth, an action is morally worthy only if the agent

[17] See also Anscombe (1981, pp. 46–47).

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performs it for the reasons that make the action right.[18] Hills and McGrath, have both argued that when an agent relies on testimony, her action will not have moral worth even if she does the right thing. They argue that in order to be motivated by right-making reasons, the agents needs to have moral understanding. This requires the agent to have beliefs about the reasons which make the action right, not just the belief that the action is right.[19] As, McGrath argues:

> if an agent Φ's because of her belief that Φ-ing is the right thing to do, but she does not understand why Φ-ing is the right thing to do, this detracts from the status of her action.[20]

The assumption that moral understanding is necessary for morally worthy actions is problematic, though I will not argue against it here.[21] But I will argue that moral testimony is not an obstacle to morally worthy actions, even if morally worthy actions do require moral understanding. For one, moral testimony can help you acquire moral understanding. Secondly, even in cases in which testimony itself is not sufficient to acquire moral understanding, moral testimony is not in the way of your actions' having moral worth.

What is moral understanding? Hills argues that moral understanding involves a set of abilities: the ability to give and follow explanations and articulate reasons for an action's moral valence.[22] According to Hills, the fact that understanding involves these abilities, and that moral understanding is valuable gives us instrumental reason not to rely on moral testimony:

> Given the importance of our acquiring and using moral understanding, we have strong reasons neither to trust moral testimony nor to defer to moral experts.[23]

However, it's puzzling, why we couldn't learn to explain why an action is wrong on the basis of moral testimony. After all, I can tell you that what you are about to do is wrong because it's cruel or unkind and thus, on the basis of my testimony, you can come to believe both that your action is wrong and why it's wrong. Hence, it's hard to see why, given the importance of moral understanding, we could have "strong reasons" to avoid trusting moral testimony. Even if in some cases testimony may not be sufficient in order to acquire understanding, it doesn't follow that we have reasons to avoid it. In fact, testimony may sometimes be necessary in order to achieve moral understanding. This is no different in the moral case than in nonmoral cases. We value not just moral but also, for example, scientific understanding. And while testimony may not always be sufficient to

[18] In particular, it's not enough that the agent performs the action because she believes that this is the right action. For a defense, see Arpaly (2003), and Markovits (2010).

[19] For another defense of this view, see Nickel (2001).

[20] McGrath (2011, pp. 38–39).

[21] For objections, see Markovits (2010).

[22] See Hills (2009, pp. 102–103).

[23] Hills (2009, p. 98).

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acquire understanding of physics, testimony is nevertheless crucial–for example through textbooks and lectures.[24]

But suppose you act on moral testimony in a case in which moral testimony is not sufficient for you to acquire moral understanding. Does your action then have moral worth? Note that moral testimony is a means to resolving moral uncertainty. When I am uncertain about whether p is the right thing to do, I have moral reason to resolve my uncertainty in a way that will make it most likely that I get it right. If I reasonably believe that someone else is in a better epistemic position to get the right answer than I am, then I have moral reason to ask that person for moral advice. Thus, an agent who seeks out and trusts reliable testimony because she wants to get it right is doing the right thing (namely, resolving her uncertainty) for the right reasons (she needs to resolve her uncertainty to do the right thing) and she has moral understanding (she reasonably believes that someone else is in a better epistemic position to find out what the right thing to do is). Her seeking out and trusting moral testimony is thereby a morally worthy action. If she didn't seek out the testimony or didn't take it, even though she believed it to be reliable, she would be blameworthy for it. And she would be even more blameworthy if she avoided or failed to trust moral testimony that she regards as reliable because she wanted her action to be morally worthy.

So, asking and taking moral advice is an action that can be morally worthy and for which an agent can deserve praise or blame. But McGrath's and Hills' concern was with the action that results from moral testimony. Even if asking for and accepting moral testimony that one regards as reliable is morally worthy, is the action that results from it also maximally morally worthy? If Sam relies on his friend's testimony for his belief that he ought to jump into the lake and save the child, is his saving the child a morally worthy action?[25]

Even if an action that is based on moral testimony isn't maximally morally worthy, this does not show that the obstacle to moral worth is moral testimony.[26] Rather, given the agent's moral ignorance, performing a maximally worthy action simply may not be one of her options. Consider again Sam's case: Suppose Sam doesn't call his friend and hence doesn't ask for moral testimony. Instead, he relies on his own reasoning even though he knows that his friend is more likely to get to the right answer than he is. But suppose that he does happen to rightly conclude that he needs to save the child. It's not clear that in this case his saving the child really is morally praiseworthy—after all, he took a risk in relying on his own deliberation. And even if it is morally praiseworthy, at the same time he deserves blame for not seeking out moral testimony. After all, he had reason to think that his friend was more likely to find out what the right thing is than he was. In this case, if there is an obstacle to his action's having maximum moral worth, this obstacle is Sam's ignorance rather than his reliance on moral testimony.

[24] See also Annas (2003).

[25] See Markovits, (forthcoming) for a defense that acting on moral testimony is morally worthy because testimony is a right-making reason.

[26] I argue that an action based on moral testimony can have maximum moral worth, elsewhere.

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Worrying about whether an agent's action deserves maximum moral credit seems a little odd. It seems equally strange to worry whether Sam's saving the child is morally worthy as it does to worry if someone got full moral credit for saving the child when she called out to a friend to jump in because she was not a confident swimmer. Ultimately, what matters is that we do the right thing. Given that we are cognitively limited, asking for help when you take someone to be better at figuring out what the right thing to do is, is often the best we can do. Of course, a perfect moral agent who knows all moral and nonmoral facts, wouldn't have to rely on moral testimony. In fact, she wouldn't have to rely on any kind of testimony. She would always be in a position to do the right thing for the right reasons. But it would be very silly of us to try to do as the ideal moral agent does.

5 Conclusion

I argued that moral testimony is no more problematic than nonmoral testimony. This shouldn't be surprising: Nonmoral testimony is so valuable because we are fallible creatures with limited cognitive resources. Moral testimony is valuable for precisely the same reasons. And we rely on moral testimony just as we rely on nonmoral testimony. This doesn't mean that there isn't anything wrong with the initial cases that motivated the principle No TESTIMONY. These cases are problematic; but I argued that they aren't problematic in virtue of being cases of moral testimony. I suggested a better explanation for what goes wrong in them and I argued that cases of nonmoral testimony can be problematic for exactly the same reasons. Finally, I argued that moral testimony is compatible with morally worthy action. In fact, I suggested, asking for moral testimony can sometimes be the best we can do.

Acknowledgments For helpful comments and discussions, the author would like to thank Nomy Arpaly, Alex Byrne, Tom Dougherty, Tyler Doggett, David Gray, Daniel Greco, Sally Haslanger, Brian Hedden, Richard Holton, Sophie Horowitz, Miranda Fricker, Elisa Mai, Julia Markovits, Josh Schechter, Miriam Schoenfield, Daniel Star, Katia Vavova, and Kenny Walden. The author would also like to thank the audiences of the 2011 Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, the 2011 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, the Boston University Ethics Group, and the MIT Work in Progress Seminar.

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