

Against Moral Deference: The Argument from Practical Deliberation

Is it problematic to form moral beliefs and act on the basis of another person's moral testimony? In this talk I argue that this practice is indeed problematic and I propose a new explanation for why it is so, namely because it interferes with the exercise and the development of our capacity for practical deliberation. My claim is that recurrent pure moral deference is *pro tanto* bad and we have *pro tanto* reasons not to defer about moral matters. Pure moral deference is the act of adopting and sustaining a purely moral judgment, or performing a morally charged action, solely on the basis of the authority and expertise of the person who provides it.

I develop my position in two stages. In the first stage, I suggest that if we want to assess whether moral deference is problematic *qua* moral deference, looking at individual or isolated cases won't be enough. I will show that although such instances can be an effective way to introduce the seemingly problematic character of moral deference, their probative value is limited. In the existing literature individual cases are usually underspecified and once we fill in the details (e.g. why the person defers), in most of these scenarios moral deference ends up being either problematic but not *qua* moral deference or unproblematic. In some cases, moral deference that triggers negative intuitions is best explained as reflecting a serious shortcoming in one's character (e.g. laziness) or deep moral ignorance (e.g. deferring about the permissibility of torture for fun). However, in many situations moral deference will seem unproblematic, e.g. when one defers because they are pressed by time, temporarily impaired in some way, in moral uncertainty, or if the situation is urgent and with high stakes. Thus I propose to shift the focus from isolated instances of moral deference to what I call *recurrent moral deference*, i.e. moral deference that occurs repetitively. I think we need to look at what it means for an agent to have a pattern of moral deference in their life, whether this triggers negative intuitions, as well as whether, and how, such recurrent deference affects them. It's plausible, I suggest, that such recurrent cases are the right target if we want to assess moral deference in itself: because they can trigger negative intuitions which cannot be explained by any factors that are unrelated to this being a pattern of moral deference.

In the second stage, I argue that what makes recurrent moral deference *pro tanto* bad is its interference with the exercise and development of our capacity for practical deliberation. I take the capacity for practical deliberation to be that which enables us to engage in processes of practical deliberation in order to work out what to do, in response to reasons, which typically includes reflection on, or imagination of, possible lines of action, taking into account different considerations and checking their relevance, weighing them up, which aims to end in a decision,

intention, or action. Practical deliberation, as I think of it, is not limited to instrumental reasoning, but rather includes how we choose its inputs and can thus be about ends and not just about means.

My argument from practical deliberation will consist of two main claims. One is *the value thesis*, which states that the capacity for practical deliberation is both instrumentally and non-instrumentally valuable. I hold that it is instrumentally valuable because it's a way of figuring out what to do guided by reasons. As such, it helps us navigate the world, solve our conflicts of value, and answer our practical questions (particularly the more complex ones where reflection is needed). Moreover, it can also contribute to ensuring the performance of the appropriate reasons-responsive actions of our future selves, which is significant because we may not always find a moral expert to defer to. The capacity for practical deliberation is also non-instrumentally valuable because its exercise, as a procedure which is about reflecting on considerations, taking perspectives, weighing reasons, making choices etc., is a way through which we shape, define, and specify our values, ends, and normative commitments. As imperfect moral agents we don't have all the right answers or a list of rules that we can always straightforwardly apply and follow. Instead, we need to figure out how our values apply to different situations because we always learn new things, we change our minds, we correct some mistaken views, we adapt and respond differently to different situations. Thus, I think it's plausible that practical deliberation is non-instrumentally valuable because being able to deliberate about our moral questions is a way of being in the world as humans, it's the way we explore morality and other normative areas, and the way we shape our conception of how we should live.

The second main claim of my argument is *the interference thesis*, which states that recurrent moral deference interferes with the exercise and the development of our capacity for practical deliberation. By replacing the (various stages of the) process of practical deliberation which an agent would undertake in trying to answer a practical question with a piece of testimony, moral deference circumvents the exercise of the capacity for practical deliberation. When we have recurrent moral deference, this happens repetitively and, given the lack of practice, the development of the capacity is also thwarted. For example, the agent wouldn't manifest their sensibilities to certain moral considerations and their ability to recognize various moral reasons; they wouldn't practise weighing up the different values that they hold etc. Like any other capacity or skill, without exercise, the capacity for practical deliberation wouldn't have the chance to improve.

To conclude, I hold that *the value thesis* and *the interference thesis*, together with the idea that it is pro tanto bad to interfere with something of value, point to the conclusion that recurrent

moral deference is pro tanto bad and thus that we have pro tanto reasons not to defer when it comes to moral matters.