

## The New Puzzle of Moral Deference

Many philosophers think that there is something troubling about moral deference, i.e., forming a moral belief solely on the basis of a moral expert's testimony. The fact that this deference is troubling is somewhat puzzling. First, such deference is not off-putting in other domains (e.g., mathematics, taxes, directions, etc.). Second, most philosophers think that one can gain both knowledge-that and knowledge-why from moral deference. Call this the Puzzle of Moral Deference.

Most explanations of why moral deference is off-putting rely on the claim that, as a method of forming moral beliefs, it is *epistemically deficient*. In particular, philosophers claim that moral deference does not give one access to any moral truth-makers (e.g., Enoch (2014), Fletcher (2016), and Lord (forthcoming)), or it does not yield understanding of why some moral proposition is true (e.g., Hopkins (2007), Hills (2009 and 2010), McGrath (2011), and Callahan 2017)). Let us call the claim that the off-puttingness of moral deference is explained by the fact that it has either of these epistemic deficiencies *The Deficiency Thesis*.

The problem with these epistemic deficiencies, according to most authors, is that they interfere with the deferrer's ability to obtain certain moral achievements. For example, some philosophers (e.g., Hills (2009) and McGrath (2011)) think deference might interfere with: reliably doing the right thing on one's own, being able to justify oneself to others, being (fully) virtuous, and being able to perform actions with (full) moral worth.

I argue that philosophers who try to solve the Puzzle of Moral Deference by relying on the Deficiency Thesis end up with a more perplexing puzzle. First, the Deficiency Thesis overgeneralizes. In particular, it entails that using many of the methods people have for forming moral beliefs should be off-putting (e.g., inference to the best explanation, *reductio ad absurdum*, memory, and so on). This is because these methods do not involve access to morally relevant features, nor do they lead to moral understanding. But, I argue, using these methods of belief-

formation are *not* off-putting.

First, take a case of inference to the best explanation. Imagine that Emily finds out that for thousands of years and across hundreds of cultures (including all modern ones), people have believed, “punishment ought to be proportional to the crime committed.” Imagine further that she finds out that all plausible moral theories entail this. She reasons that the best explanation of these facts is that it is true that punishment ought to be proportional to the crime committed. There would be nothing off-putting with Emily forming this belief on the basis of such reasoning. However, this abductive reasoning does not give her access to *why* this moral claim is true (i.e., to the morally relevant properties) and also doesn’t yield moral understanding.

Second, take a case of *reductio ad absurdum*. Imagine that you show that the negation of “stealing is wrong” entails a contradiction. This gives us great reason to think that stealing is wrong. But it does nothing to tell us *why* stealing is wrong, i.e., it does not give us access to the morally relevant properties. Nor does it give us understanding of why stealing is wrong. But, if the Deficiency Thesis is true, then forming moral beliefs on the basis of inference to the best explanation or a *reductio* should be off-putting. But it is not. The same problem occurs for cases of inductive reasoning, memory, and analogical reasoning.

There is a further wrinkle. A kind of moral deference, what I call *moral testimony*, is actually often epistemically superior to these other methods. Moral testimony occurs when a testifier tells (or directs their assertion) at a particular audience. This is distinct from what I call *mere deference*, where one believes a moral proposition solely on the basis that someone else believes or asserts this proposition, e.g., on the basis of overhearing a conversation.

The epistemic advantages of moral testimony arise because of the responsibilities that a testifier takes on when she asserts a proposition to an audience and that audience *takes her word for it*. First, it seems like the testifier takes on the responsibility of meeting challenges to the audience’s

belief. That is, when the audience's testimony-based belief is challenged and she cannot answer the challenge, she can *pass the buck* to the testifier. For example, imagine Katie believes that organ markets are morally bad on the basis of a moral expert's testimony. Chad challenges Katie to defend her belief, but Chad is not satisfied with her response. At this point, there seems to be a further response available to Katie: she can pass the buck to the moral expert. That is, she can direct Chad to ask the moral expert for a further defense of her belief.

But this extra move is not available in many cases involving forming moral beliefs using the other methods I've discussed. For example, if one believes that polluting is wrong on the basis of remembering this fact, one cannot defend one's memory-based belief by directing a challenger to one's memory. The same goes for the other methods of belief-formation.

Second, there is a related responsibility that the testifier takes on. If a testifier asserts that *p* to an audience and that audience comes to believe that *p* because she takes a testifier's word for it, then the testifier is required to answer the audience if she asks the testifier *why* *p* is true. For example, if a moral expert tells Katie that organ markets are bad and she defers to the expert on this matter, she seems to have the right or entitlement to be told by *that* moral expert why organ markets are bad. Thus, moral deference seems to put the deferrer in a good epistemic position vis-à-vis the morally relevant properties of actions.

However, one does not have an entitlement to be answered by the other belief formation methods. They do not talk back. You cannot ask them for clarification or explanation. In this way, moral testimony is epistemically superior.

Thus, philosophers who rely on the Deficiency Thesis face what I call the New Puzzle of Moral Deference: they must explain why moral deference is so troubling, but all these other methods of moral belief formation are not—given that moral testimony is epistemically superior.

## References

(for the full paper)

- Brandom, Robert. (1994). *Making It Explicit*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Callahan, Laura. (2017) "Moral Testimony: A Re-Conceived Understanding Explanation," *The Philosophical Quarterly*. 1-23.
- Crisp, Roger. (2014). Moral Testimony Pessimism: A Defence. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 88 (1): 129–43.
- Enoch, David. (2014). A Defense of Moral Deference. *Journal of Philosophy* 111 (5): 229-58.
- Fletcher, Guy. (2016). Moral Testimony: One More Time With Feeling. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 11. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 45-73. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fritz, James. (2018). What Pessimism about Moral Deference Means for Disagreement. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21 (1): 121-36.
- Fritz, James and Tristram McPherson. (Forthcoming). Moral Steadfastness and Meta-ethics. *American Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Goldberg, Sanford. (2006). Reductionism and the Distinctiveness of Testimonial Knowledge. In Lackey, J. and E. Sosa (Eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony* (pp. 127-144). Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, Sanford. (2015). *Assertion: On the Philosophical Significance of Assertoric Speech*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hills, Alison. (2009). Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics* 120 (1): 94-127.
- Hills, Alison. (2010). *The Beloved Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hills, Alison. (2013). Moral Testimony. *Philosophy Compass* 8 (6): 552-59.
- Hopkins, Robert. (2007). What is Wrong with Moral Testimony?. *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 74 (3): 611–34.
- Howell, Robert. (2014). Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference. *Noûs* 48 (3): 389-415.
- Kelly, Thomas. (2005). The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol 1. Edited by Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne, 167-96. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lackey, J. (2011). Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge. In Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, *Assertion*, 251-75. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lord, Errol. (Forthcoming). How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality Through Acquaintance

- and Deference. In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, John. (2011). What Is Assertion? In Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, *Assertion*, 79-96. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGrath, Sarah. (2009). The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference. *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (1): 321-44.
- McGrath, Sarah. (2011). Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 108 (3): 111-137.
- McMahan, Jeff. (2000). Moral intuition. In H. L. - (Ed.), *The blackwell guide to ethical theory* (pp. 92--110). Blackwell.
- McMyler, Benjamin. (2011). *Testimony, Trust, and Authority*. Oxford University Press.
- Mogensen, Andreas. (2015). Moral Testimony Pessimism and the Uncertain Value of Authenticity. *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 93 (3): 1-24.
- Nickel, Philip. (2001). Moral Testimony and Its Authority. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4 (3): 253–66.