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Comment on Karen Jones and François Schroeter

Abstract: In this comment I defend my account of moral understanding and its role in morally worthy action and claim that a fully virtuous person would have moral understanding. This means that deference to moral experts is not always appropriate. But there is still room for a social moral epistemology, whereby moral experts pass on moral understanding.

1. What Is a Moral Expert?

Can there be moral expertise? And if there is such a thing, what is it like?

It is widely recognized that there are different types of expertise: theoretical expertise, which is standardly described as having knowledge (and passing it on) and practical expertise, which is a matter of acting successfully. It might seem that moral expertise must be a kind of practical expertise. After all isn't morality a practical subject and a moral expert someone who acts morally well? But on the other hand, you can have moral propositional knowledge, knowledge that an action is right or wrong, for instance, or that courage is a virtue, or that you have a duty to give to charity.

Many discussions of moral expertise focus on theoretical moral expertise, and that is, I think, because there is a particular interest in the social role that a theoretical moral expert can play. A theoretical moral expert is someone who has lots of propositional moral knowledge, and who can pass on this knowledge to non-experts, either personally or through institutions such as ethics committees, Government advisory committees and so on.

This kind of theoretical moral expertise has seemed problematic to many people, however. Is it really true that the rest of us, who are not moral experts, should defer to Ethics committees, or at least to the moral experts on those committees? Should we, indeed, defer to moral philosophers, who are often asked to be on these committees and whom you might expect to be moral experts, if anyone is?

Many people find that, on reflection, they are not convinced that they should defer to moral philosophers about moral questions. In fact, they are not convinced that they should defer to anyone. Rather, moral questions are ones for which you should make up your own mind.

But why? One important question is whether moral philosophers—or indeed anyone else—really is reliable and trustworthy informant about ethics. Are there ethical truths? Can there be ethical knowledge? Even if there can, do non-experts have any way of identifying people who do have moral knowledge and who can pass it on? After all, many of the people who you might think of as moral experts (those asked to be on the Ethics committees, for instance), disagree with one another. Nor is it clear why they were asked to be on the committee (i.e. in virtue of what were they identified socially as a moral expert), or how people should be chosen for this role. This suggests that it is extremely difficult to be a ‘wise recipient’ of moral testimony,

But even leaving these serious problems aside, many people think there is something odd about deferring to the authority of other people’s moral judgements, and that this oddity is independent of whether you can identify her as a moral expert. Suppose you had every reason to think that she was reliable and trustworthy and knowledgeable. Still, many people think that they should make up their own minds about morality, rather than deferring.

I have argued elsewhere that moral deference is not morally or epistemically ideal (Hills 2009; 2010). This is because it is important in ethics to understand why your action is morally right and to choose it on that basis. Understanding why an action is right is not the same as knowing why it is right, for it requires that you have the ability to judge not only why this action is right, but why other, similar actions would be right.

Whereas knowledge can be passed on by testimony in a relatively straightforward manner, understanding is typically not transmissible in the same way. If I tell you ‘you should not say that to that colleague: it’s rude’ because I know that doing so is wrong, you may come to know it too (and you know why: because it’s rude). But you may very well not gain the ability to make judgements about similar cases, hence though you know why it is wrong, you do not understand why it is wrong.

Why is it important to understand why your action is right, rather than merely know that it is (or know why it is)? You are equally likely to do the right action (like knowledge, understanding requires that you get the answer right).

No one disputes that doing the right action is morally important. But it is not the only thing that is morally important. A morally ideal agent—one who is virtuous, one who performs morally worthy actions—will do the right action and she will do so because she is responding to moral reasons. You can respond to moral reasons through your desires, feelings and emotions. But you can also respond to moral reasons cognitively, through your appreciation of them. That is, you can ‘mirror’, in your own reasoning and decision-making processes, the reasons for performing a particular action. You decide what to do on the basis of your grasp of why your action is right. If your situation were different, you would have made a different decision, responding to different moral reasons. Responsiveness to moral reasons precisely involves having and using moral understanding to decide what to do.

What follows from this about moral expertise? Traditionally, theoretical expertise consists in having knowledge in a relevant domain, and passing it on

through testimony or through other people deferring to you. It is obvious that this does not fit well with my account of moral epistemology. In the first place, if we take a virtuous person to be a kind of moral expert, she will be expert in virtue of her moral understanding, not her knowledge. So at least one kind of moral expert is not characterizable in terms of moral knowledge.

Secondly, it is not ideal for non-experts to form their moral judgements by trusting testimony from an expert: it is better for them, where possible, to use their own judgement.

Jones and Schroeter disagree. They wish to defend a “a robustly social epistemology with room for epistemic divisions of labor and relations of deference” (229). They concede that in some cases moral deference is not ideal, namely when a person acts on the basis of “bare testimony about all-in rightness”. If I tell you which action is right (but no more) and you act on that basis, you are clearly not responding to the reasons why that action is right—for I haven’t told you what they are. But suppose I did tell you what they are. Now you know that your action is right, and you know why. What could possibly be wrong with acting on that knowledge: surely doing so is morally worthy?

If this is right, then whilst ‘bare deference’ is not an ideal—and so moral epistemology does have some genuinely important differences from other fields, in which bare deference is perfectly acceptable—deference to others about the right-making features of a situation is fine. So the traditional conception of an expert—someone who transmits knowledge—does apply in ethics.

Secondly, Jones and Schroeter point out that even if we did regard moral understanding as some kind of ideal, we would not be obliged to try to develop it on every occasion. In fact doing so would be a very bad idea, and it would be much better to recognize our own limitations and ask others for help. They suggest we would do better to develop our skills at being a ‘wise recipient’ of moral testimony, that is, one who can do a good job of selecting a person from whom to take testimony.

2. Moral Worth and Moral Understanding

In response to Jones and Schroeter I would like to defend (with some qualifications) my original claim about the importance of moral understanding for moral worth and then to discuss further possible social roles for a moral expert. I will begin with moral worth and moral virtue.

I think that moral worth and moral virtue are importantly related, because both essentially concern the proper way to respond to moral reasons. In my view, a virtuous person will typically and characteristically perform morally worthy action. It follows that we can clarify what is involved with morally worthy action by thinking about moral virtue. And I think that many would agree that a morally virtuous person is not someone who has to ‘phone a friend’ or ask Google what it is right to do or what the relevant moral reasons in a situation really are (Howell 2012).

One explanation for this is that responding appropriately to moral reasons requires that she feels the right emotions, and typically she will do so only if she has made up her own mind, rather than relying on the testimony of others. If I have to ask you what to do, perhaps I will not be sufficiently outraged by injustice or will not care enough about the needs of others to count as fully virtuous.

Another is that the virtuous person's moral views are integrated into a consistent whole, whereas a 'second hand' moral judgement arrived at through testimony may not be very well integrated with the rest of your moral judgements.¹

These both may be right. But I do not think that that they exhaust the problems with moral deference. The virtuous person makes her own moral judgements, because she is a 'rule' as Aristotle puts it, or a moral compass herself. She herself is responsive to moral reasons, in the sense that the explanation of why she chose that action must make reference to the reasons why it is right. 'Second hand' moral knowledge does not have the kind of direct responsiveness to moral reasons which is part of moral virtue and of morally worthy action.

In fact, I think that quite generally, acting for reasons requires that you are responsive to reasons, where this responsiveness is the exercise of your own ability to grasp why those features of your situation favour your action, and drawing the appropriate conclusion on that basis. In other words, acting for reasons requires you to understand why your action is 'the thing to do' and to use that understanding in deciding what to do.

3. Social Roles for a Moral Expert

I have argued that, ideally, you should make moral judgements yourself, rather than deferring to a moral expert. Jones and Schroeter worry that this is too individualistic and leaves insufficient room for a social epistemology for morality.

In earlier work, I emphasized the importance of making up your own mind and argued against putting your trust in moral testimony. But it does not follow that there is no room for a social moral epistemology even when we are trying to attain and to use moral understanding rather than moral knowledge.

In the first place, it is quite right to point out, as Jones and Schroeter do, that we may not all be capable of achieving moral understanding. Perhaps some people are simply no good at using their own judgement (or perhaps to do so successfully they would need a kind of experience that they haven't had and couldn't easily get). If so it would be right for them to defer to a moral expert (if they could find one). I agree that, for certain agents in particular situations, deferring to an expert is the best option.

More importantly, even straightforward testimony can sometimes transmit understanding. For instance, suppose that I explain to you why giving to those currently in need is a matter of justice rather than charity. Rather than simply putting your trust in what I say, you think it through and come to grasp its

¹ These are amongst the explanations offered by Howell 2012 for why it is not ideal to trust moral testimony.

truth. Now you can make correct judgements about similar situations. You have come to understand why you should give, and testimony played a crucial role, but not in a way best characterized by trust or deference.

Trust in testimony is not completely passive; after all you have to decide whom to trust, understand what they say, and check that it isn't obviously mistaken. Nevertheless, typically to acquire understanding by means of testimony you have to be more active, thinking things through in test cases to ensure you have a proper grip on what is going on.

There are some well known methods for helping people acquire understanding that encourage them to be active learners. One is the use of analogy. For instance in Thomson's famous example of the violin player, for whom you are the life support, you must decide whether it would be right (or at least permissible) to detach the violinist and why. Then you need to compare that situation with a typical abortion, and decide whether the same factors are present. Finally, you have to conclude whether it is right to make the same judgement about abortions as about the violinist.

Similarly, Peter Singer asks how it is right to treat humans with a similar mental capacity to that of animals, and asks readers to draw conclusions about how to treat animals.

In both cases, the reader is not asked simply to trust or defer to the judgement of a moral expert. You are asked to take your own view, with particular attention to the features of the situation that make some actions right and others wrong. In other words, you have to develop and use moral understanding. Nevertheless, the moral expert has played a vital role, in finding and presenting such a thought-provoking analogy. Quite possibly, this particular situation would never have occurred to you otherwise, and you would never have acquired moral understanding without her help.

Another very important method for transmitting moral understanding is through question and answer. But whereas the traditional model of acquiring knowledge would have the non-expert asking questions and the expert giving the answers, here it is the other way round. A moral expert may ask a probing sort of question which spurs the non-expert to think again or differently about a moral matter. The moral expert is not transmitting information, rather a mode of thought.

If this all sounds rather like a moral philosophy seminar, then that is, I think, no accident. One of the major purposes of moral philosophy is to try to attain and use moral understanding. But of course, you do not need to be a professor of philosophy to have moral understanding or to use these methods to share moral understanding with others.

4. Conclusion

There is more than one kind of moral expertise. Even if we concentrate only on theoretical moral expertise, there is still more than one kind. The traditional conception of theoretical expertise—an expert has knowledge and passes it on

through deference and trusted testimony—is legitimate. There is a role for this kind of expert where moral understanding is not available. But there is another kind of theoretical moral expert, who has and uses moral understanding to make her moral judgements. This moral understanding can be shared, but not typically in the same way that knowledge is passed on. Rather, the recipient needs to be thinking actively, working through test cases and developing her own grasp of the reasons why some action is right or wrong. The role of the moral expert here is not to tell her what to think, but rather show her how to think, or to help her find the right way herself.

This also has implications for social epistemology quite generally. This is not just a matter of deferring to experts and putting your trust in their testimony. There are other ways of transmitting epistemically valuable states, that require the receiver to be more active, to do a lot of thinking herself, with the help and guidance of others. Experts of all kinds—not just moral experts—can play this role, and share their understanding with others.

Bibliography

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