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Moral Testimony and Collective Moral Governance

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ABSTRACT
I suggest that a moderate version of pessimism about moral testimony succeeds. However, I claim also that all major pessimist accounts—Understanding, Affect, Virtue, and Autonomy—fail. Having argued for these claims, I propose a new pessimist alternative.

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1. Introduction

If you tell me that it's raining outside, I would, presumably, be justified in acquiring the belief that it is raining on the basis of your say-so.[1] But if you tell me that some war is unjust or some action wrong, I would be well-advised to think the matter through for myself even if you—my moral witness—are otherwise trustworthy. Something like this line of reasoning has, in the past two decades, spurred a large body of literature on deference to moral testimony, understood as the process of forming moral beliefs on the basis of other people's moral assertions. Several philosophers have urged *pessimism* about deference thus understood. Importantly, the type of deference thought to be suspect is what has come to be known as *pure* deference. *Pure* is contrasted with *impure* or *empirical* moral deference.[2] We talk about impure moral deference when I rely on your testimony in forming a moral belief only because you have much more non-moral information about the relevant issue than I do.

The inappropriateness of relying on testimony can be taken to be either moral or epistemic.[3] On the epistemic reading, we cannot rely on other people's testimony, either because there aren't 'moral experts' or because we don't know who they are [McGrath 2011]. According to the moral reading, we *can* acquire justification for

[1] There is a debate in epistemology concerning the question of whether testimony in general provides independent justification for belief over and above reasons to think that the witness is reliable. Reductionists argue for the latter thesis, non-reductionists for the former. Here, I set this issue aside and focus exclusively on moral testimony. I note that even if you are a reductionist, you are not thereby a pessimist about testimony: you still think that you can believe a reliable witness who tells you it is raining. Many moral deference pessimists, however, argue that it is inappropriate to rely on the moral testimony of a reliable witness.
[2] 'Impure' is McGrath's [2011] term; 'empirical' is Howell's [2014].
[3] Roger Crisp [2014: 129] defines pessimism as the view that there is something 'morally or epistemically regrettable' about deference to moral testimony.

moral beliefs or moral knowledge on the basis of testimony, but we morally *should not*: moral deference, on this view, is inappropriate.[4]

The moral interpretation of pessimism is both more common and more plausible. The epistemic reading derives whatever plausibility it has from the use of the word 'expert', which may be taken to imply an institutional structure that doesn't exist in the case of morality. There are no academic degrees in, or professional certificates of, moral expertise. But we don't need moral experts in *that* sense in order to be in a position to acquire testimonial justification for moral claims. All that we need are people who can be justifiably seen as more reliable than we are. Most of us, I take it, know people who are wiser or better at moral reasoning than we are, at least when it comes to particular moral domains. The proponent of the moral reading cedes this point but insists that testimony is nonetheless an inappropriate method of forming moral beliefs. Some epistemically sound methods of belief formation may nonetheless be inappropriate on non-epistemic grounds.[5]

Pessimists do more than argue against deference. They make attempts to explain *why* deference seems inappropriate in many cases.[6] Testimonial moral beliefs are said to be deficient on account of undermining autonomy [Driver 2006], or lacking understanding [Nickel 2001; Hills 2009; Callahan 2018] or appropriate affect [Fletcher 2016], or of not being conducive to virtue, among other things [Crisp 2014; Howell 2014]. It has been argued also that our qualms about moral deference show that we do not think that there are moral facts and moral truths [McGrath 2011].

Pessimism has its critics—so-called optimists about deference to moral testimony. They have argued that deference can be perfectly kosher, and perhaps advisable [Sliwa 2012; Zagzebski 2012a; Enoch 2014].

In what follows, I will argue that optimist responses to pessimism generally miss the mark: optimists offer counterexamples to an excessively strong version of pessimism. There is a moderate version that accords with our intuitions and practices. But I will claim also that standard explanations of the source of our pessimist intuitions, such as missing understanding or affect, fail. Having established these claims, I will propose a new positive view. Briefly, extant accounts of the source of our unease share a common problem: they focus on some feature of the belief or the believer in isolation from the believer's role in the moral community. But our qualms about moral testimony, I will suggest, are rooted in a commitment to certain collective moral practices, in particular to what I will call 'collective moral governance'. These commitments have implications for various features of moral beliefs, such as the importance of understanding, which is why explanations such as the understanding one seem initially plausible. However, pessimist proposals that focus on an individual believer and her beliefs are bound to remain deficient, or so I will argue.

In addressing my task, I proceed as follows. First, I offer a formulation of the pessimist thesis that I suggest is immune to the most compelling counterexamples on offer

[4] Other adjectives used by philosophers here include 'odd' [McGrath 2011: 116] and 'fishy' [Enoch 2014: 231].
[5] Thus, suppose that I have been asked to review a manuscript. I am qualified to judge the merits of the submission, but there is a second reviewer who is in an even better position to judge those merits than I am. In general, it would be inappropriate for me simply to adopt the second reviewer's verdict. The inappropriateness would be practical, not epistemic. Moral inappropriateness can be seen as a species of practical inappropriateness.
[6] As Zagzebski [2012a: 117] notes, our unease about reliance on moral testimony has its roots in Enlightenment ideals of moral agency.

(section 2). Next, I consider several pessimist accounts proposed by others, and argue that none of them explains our intuitions (section 3). I then advance a new way for making sense of pessimist intuitions (section 4). In the concluding section (section 5), I summarize the results and briefly address the metaethical implications of the account proposed.

2. A Plausible Kind of Pessimism

The pessimist thesis is sometimes taken to be the thesis that pure moral deference is *never* acceptable, at least not in the case of mature agents whose moral agency is unimpaired.[7] This strong thesis has been questioned. Several authors have argued, persuasively in my view, that pure moral deference is *sometimes* morally acceptable, and perhaps preferable. Zagzebski [2012a, 2012b], for instance, maintains that it is acceptable to defer to a moral exemplar. Enoch [2014] contends that, when the moral stakes are high, whatever reasons there may be not to defer may be outweighed by the reasons to get things right regarding an important matter such as the justness of a war.

I think that some of the counterexamples are compelling, but, in what follows, I will not endeavour to show that they are. Rather, I will assume that they are, and argue that even if the counterexamples proffered do succeed, the pessimist view will not be refuted. For pessimists need not demur at all alleged cases in which pure moral deference is appropriate, and in fact some prominent pessimists do not demur [Hills 2009: 123–4].

More importantly, pessimists *should not* demur. They should not allow an overly strong thesis to be foisted upon them. The pessimist, that is, need not argue that an unimpaired agent's pure moral deference is *always* or even *typically* inappropriate. What she ought to argue, instead, is something weaker. It is to this weaker formulation that I now turn.

There is a presumption against deference and in favour of settling moral matters by using one's own moral reasoning capacities. Moral deference understood as a kind of outsourcing of moral reasoning—relying on another to do the moral reasoning for you—is presumed not to be morally kosher until proven otherwise. A possible formulation of this moderate version of the pessimist thesis is the following:

> *Presumption*. Moral deference is guilty until proven innocent. Reasons are required to show that deference is appropriate in a given case.

Reasons of the sort in question will sometimes be available. The presumption can be obviously overturned in the case of emotionally immature or seriously impaired agents, such as children or people who have severe brain damage or who are strongly under the influence of alchohol. Less obviously, it can be overturned in the case of mature, non-impaired agents—for instance, in high stakes cases, as Enoch [2014] argues (cf. Zagzebski [2012a]).

The pessimist thesis contains a second important claim. It has to do with the alleged asymmetry between moral and non-moral deference alluded to in the beginning. Even if deference is problematic, it is possible that it is problematic across the board—that is, that there is no difference between moral and non-moral cases. If so, we may have to explain why that is, but the explanation would apply to a large class of cases that

[7] Sliwa [2012] calls this strong thesis 'no testimony'.

contains moral cases as a subset. Pessimism about moral deference says something different: deference to moral testimony is *distinctly* problematic. Of course, the moral deference pessimist need not be committed to the view that non-moral deference is generally *unproblematic*. The point is, rather, that, even if there is something troublesome about deference in general, there is something especially so about deference to moral testimony. The second pessimist sub-thesis can be stated thus:

> *Asymmetry*. There is no presumption against outsourcing non-moral reasoning parallel to that against outsourcing moral reasoning. There is thus an asymmetry between moral and non-moral deference.[8]

The two sub-theses are perfectly compatible with the existence of cases—many cases, in fact—in which pure moral deference is appropriate, advisable, or even required.

I said earlier that counterexamples to pessimism target a very strong version of the thesis, not the moderate version that I propose. Before I continue, however, I should mention that some authors have argued against this moderate version—in particular, against *Asymmetry*. To my knowledge, no one has argued explicitly against *Presumption*, but, if *Asymmetry* can be refuted, the issue will lose much of its interest, as it will follow that moral deference is problematic only because all deference is. So, let me pause to address the issue.

The argument that I have in mind has been developed in detail by Groll and Decker [2014], although a brief version can be found in Sliwa's [2012] earlier paper. According to Groll and Decker, as well as Sliwa, moral deference does not differ in status from non-moral deference. In making their case, asymmetry sceptics begin by distinguishing between two sorts of cases. In one case, an agent believes on testimony what should be *obvious* to him or her—for instance, that burning cats for fun is wrong. Sliwa says that the problem with an agent in this sort of case is *moral ignorance*, while Groll and Decker claim that the problem is lack of what they call *normal moral knowledge*. Such cases show a defect in a moral agent, according to *Asymmetry* sceptics. Sceptics then argue that the cases of a defect in the agent cannot help underwrite *Asymmetry*, since profound ignorance and lack of so-called 'normal' knowledge would be problematic in non-moral domains as well, not just in the moral realm. For instance, if I believe that 2 + 2 equals 4 only because you told me so, there is something deficient about my reasoning abilities. If, on the other hand, an agent's reliance on testimony does not show moral ignorance or some such defect, then there is no problem with such reliance.[9] Groll and Decker [2014: 19] write, 'reliance on testimony for coming to know non-normal knowledge is perfectly consistent with being a well-functioning agent.'

However, this argument does not suffice to refute *Asymmetry*, for two reasons. First, in the moral case, it is reliance on testimony regarding complex and fraught moral issues, and not only regarding what should be obvious to one, that is seen as

[8] Not necessarily *all* types of non-moral deference. There is also thought to be something problematic about aesthetic deference, but, for present purposes, I set aside this issue. Asymmetry is meant to contrast moral testimony with testimony about ordinary factual or scientific matters.

[9] I note that, according to Sliwa, there is also a problem when an agent relies on testimony concerning a controversial case. Sliwa [2012: 187] argues in response that relying on testimony in controversial matters is a problem across the board, not just in moral cases. Note, however, that she might be facing a dilemma here. If an agent relies on testimony in an utterly uncontroversial case, something is wrong with said agent's moral reasoning. If, on the other hand, an agent relies on testimony in a controversial case, that is problematic. So, it is not clear in what case, precisely, it is acceptable for an agent to rely on testimony, on Sliwa's view.

problematic. Second, and relatedly, more is required of moral agents than the possession of normal moral knowledge—namely, a commitment to exercising one's own moral reasoning capacities and answering moral questions for oneself. In non-moral matters, we often see outsourcing reasoning to someone else as perfectly acceptable. This is true even when an agent has very weak reasons for outsourcing, such as reasons of convenience. For instance, there is nothing objectionable about my letting you calculate the tip and going along with the result. If I myself cannot do the calculation, that may, indeed, show a deficiency in my abilities, but, assuming that I can, there is nothing troublesome about asking you to do it for me. By contrast, it is not perfectly acceptable for me to let you do the reasoning about a moral issue—or my asking you to do it for me—and go along with the result. I am expected at least to try to reason through the matter for myself first.

I conclude that *Asymmetry* stands. And, since *Presumption* has not been challenged, I will assume that so does *Presumption*. The question is 'why?' What explains our unease about moral deference?

3. A Few Pessimist Proposals

3.1 Understanding

I consider the leading candidate explanation of pessimist intuitions to be the Understanding explanation. An account along these lines has been defended prominently by Nickel [2001], Hopkins [2007], and Hills [2009], among others. The idea is briefly this. Even if we can acquire justification and knowledge on the basis of moral testimony, the knowledge that we can acquire in this way is propositional knowledge without understanding. But, when it comes to moral beliefs, mere propositional knowledge does not suffice (as it may in the case of various non-moral matters). Responsible moral agents do not adopt moral beliefs if they do not grasp the reasons that support those beliefs.

Some authors have tried to argue in response that understanding *can* be acquired via testimony [Mogensen 2017; Croce 2020].[10] I don't think that these arguments succeed. In fact, it is arguably true by definition that a testimonial moral belief is a belief held without sufficient understanding. For if you understand sufficiently *why* a moral proposition is true, then presumably you do not believe that proposition *on the basis of testimony*.[11] Another person's testimony might have been instrumental in getting you to understand, but, once you do, the belief is based on grasp of the relevant reasons and their relative weights, not on the other person's say-so.[12]

[10] Mogensen's discussion is nuanced, but the main relevant suggestion that he makes [2017: 267] is that the moral witness can share her reasons, and the recipient of the testimony can trust the witness. Croce suggests that the main obstacle to accepting the view that testimony transmits understanding is the idea that understanding involves, in addition to an informational component, a 'grasping' component, and that possession of the informational component is not sufficient for grasping. But then Croce [2020: 379–81] argues that, in easy cases (ordinary utterances such as 'I need to leave Rome today'), we can easily grasp the basis of the information acquired.

[11] I think that the cases that both Mogensen and Croce have in mind are of just this sort, ones where a person acquires understanding thanks to testimony but forms a belief that's ultimately based on her own understanding. Testimony becomes like the ladder that one kicks away when it is no longer needed.

[12] Indeed, the moral witness may change her mind about the issue, and that wouldn't be sufficient to cause a change in the other person's moral beliefs.

But, while this particular objection to Understanding fails, there are other problems with the proposal. Importantly, in making moral judgments, we frequently rely on intuitions.[13] When we do, we might well lack understanding. Consider, for instance, how difficult it has been to pinpoint the normative differences, if any, that lead us to make different judgments about different versions of the Trolley dilemma. Yet few philosophers question reliance on intuitions in the absence of understanding. A small minority—prominently, Singer and Greene—do, of course, and perhaps all of us ought to do so, but, as a matter of fact, by and large, we do not.[14] Distrusting intuitions is not an ingrained feature of our moral practices. The Understanding account cannot explain why reliance on one's own intuitions without understanding is seen as acceptable while deference to testimony is not.

3.2 Affect

Enoch [2014], although not a pessimist, offers a different way to account for pessimist intuitions. He suggests that the reason why we have qualms about moral deference is that we expect a moral judgment to be not simply an intellectual but an emotional achievement. We want people to have appropriate emotions toward the right-making and wrong-making features of acts. An agent who defers to another may, perhaps, have an emotional response to the right or wrong-making properties, for example, be saddened or outraged that some act is unjust (without grasping the reasons why what's going on is unjust), but we expect an emotional response to the particular wrong-making features, not to the mere fact that an act is unjust.[15] It can be argued here that deference is incompatible with an appropriate emotional response in non-moral cases as well yet is not seen as thereby inappropriate. Enoch [ibid.: 255] responds by saying that, in non-moral cases, it is not *expected* of people to have an appropriate emotional response.

While this suggestion is not without merit, I think that it cannot be right. It is true that, ideally, an agent would possess appropriate emotions, but there are plenty of cases in which agents do not possess appropriate emotions, yet we do not consider the judgments that they make to be problematic for that reason. For instance, a person might not be emotionally distraught by a calamity in a distant country. It is nonetheless seen as perfectly appropriate for such a person to form a belief about the moral badness of the calamity on the basis of moral reasons in the absence of affect.

The upshot of this subsection and the previous one is that, so long as one relies on either one's own understanding or one's own affect, or both, there seems to be no problem. A judgment arrived at in one of these ways may be seen as mistaken, of course, but not as *inappropriately arrived at*. We sometimes override our own understanding and lean on our affective responses, as might a person who finds Singer-type consequentialist arguments 'unintuitive' without being able to put her finger on a flaw in them. At other times, we override our own affect, as may someone persuaded by Singer's arguments but whose affective responses are not following suit. The

[13] Mogensen [2017: 271] makes this point, too. Haidt [2001] argued, famously, that reliance on gut feelings is extremely widespread, although see Jacobson [2012] for a counterargument.
[14] Peter Railton [2014] defends reliance on intuitions even when we do not understand their basis.
[15] A similar view has been defended by Guy Fletcher [2016].

problem with deference to testimony is neither missing understanding, nor missing affect. Rather, it is relying on other people's understanding, or their affect, or both.

3.3 Virtue and Practical Wisdom

It has been argued also that the explanation of our intuitions that moral deference is inappropriate has to do with ideals of virtue and practical wisdom. We may, following Crisp [2014], call this *the phronetic argument against deference*. According to this argument, while a person may acquire moral knowledge and use that knowledge as a guide to right action by deferring to someone else, deference is not the way to virtue and practical wisdom. Howell [2014] defends a version of this argument. Hills [2009: 108–13] is sympathetic. Crisp [2014: 142] endorses it fully, and goes so far as to suggest that moral testimony pessimism is an implication of *optimism about practical wisdom*, understood as the view that a fully virtuous person possesses a proper grasp of both moral principles and their applications to particular cases. Moral beliefs acquired on the basis of another person's say-so are not the sort of beliefs that we expect of a *phronimos*.

But I doubt that this proposal can succeed either. From the fact that deference is not a morally *exemplary* method of belief acquisition, it does not follow that it is *inappropriate*. Arguably, a moral belief based on gut feelings for which one has no good reasons—as in Haidt's moral dumbfounding experiments—is acquired in a non-exemplary way as well (that is, not in the way of the wise and fully virtuous). The same goes for a moral judgment based on understanding without appropriate emotional response: such a judgment may be, to that extent, deficient. A *phronimos* may be assumed to have both an adequate grasp of the reasons and an appropriate emotional response. But both one's own intuitions and one's own grasp of the reasons are generally accepted as appropriate methods of moral belief acquisition all on their own.

3.4 Autonomy

There is an important possibility that we have not yet considered. It could be argued that moral deference is incompatible with autonomy, and that this is why we see such deference as inappropriate [Driver 2006]. In developing this line of argument, it might help to begin by distinguishing between *epistemic* moral autonomy and *practical* moral autonomy. Epistemic moral autonomy is autonomy that we exercise in forming moral beliefs. Practical autonomy, by contrast, has to do with the determination of our will. The debate about moral deference concerns primarily belief formation, not actions, and so epistemic autonomy is chiefly at issue. Epistemic autonomy may be preserved in the face of compromised practical autonomy. Thus, a private in an army may perform an action that he considers morally wrong, because his military commander orders him to do so. In obeying an order that goes against his own conscience, the private compromises his own practical autonomy, but if his judgment is not unduly influenced by the commander's, then the private's epistemic moral autonomy remains intact.[16] One can argue, however, that practical autonomy cannot survive a

[16] Pressure to reduce cognitive dissonance might lead people in such circumstances to change their beliefs. I am imagining a case in which this doesn't happen.

puncture in epistemic autonomy. Thus, if I act on a belief instilled in me via manipulation, it is not only my epistemic autonomy but my practical autonomy that might be compromised. It is possible, then, that qualms about moral deference have to do either with a concern with our epistemic moral autonomy *per se*, or with a worry that compromised epistemic autonomy would lead to compromised practical autonomy, or both. What of this argument?

I do not think that the Autonomy proposal, either, succeeds as it stands. First, it is only what we may call *direct* autonomy that may be said to conflict with deference to moral testimony [Zagzebski 2012a; Lillehammer 2014]. An agent who defers to another still has a choice as to whom to trust. But perhaps one can argue that moral belief requires the exercise of direct autonomy.

One problem with this latter suggestion is that, to the extent that deference to testimony is incompatible with direct autonomy, it is so across the board, not just in the moral domain. So, we would still need an explanation of why direct autonomy is crucial in the moral realm but not elsewhere.[17] Without such an explanation, *Asymmetry* remains puzzling.[18]

Second, and more importantly, direct autonomy can be said to be lacking in many cases typically accepted as unproblematic, as when people rely on intuitions without being able to make explicit their reasons for a judgment. In such cases, a person may be said to choose to defer to her own intuitions. So, the autonomy that she exercises is of the indirect sort: she defers to her own intuitions without understanding. The person who defers while choosing to whom to defer also exercises only indirect autonomy.

I conclude that none of the key attempts to motivate pessimism succeeds.[19] But the pessimist need not give up yet. In the next section, I explain why.

4. My Proposal

All proposals discussed so far share a common flaw—exclusive focus on individual moral reasoners and their beliefs. What we need at this point is to step back and see a reasoner in relation to the community, and to ask what we think that we, as a community, are to do in the search for moral truth. Our intuitions about the inappropriateness of moral deference, I wish to suggest, have to do with the division of moral reasoning labour to which we are committed, and with underlying assumptions about collective moral governance. There is a good deal to be said about these

[17] Note that making a judgment on the basis of one's own grasp of the reasons may be necessary also in cases in which a person wants to be considered an expert in a given domain—e.g. an expert pathologist. This point has been made by Benton [2016: 496] and Lackey [2016: 511].

[18] An anonymous referee suggests a possible explanation that appeals to a Kantian view of morality as a domain of free and responsible moral agents. But champions of indirect autonomy can argue that indirect autonomy preserves both enough freedom and enough responsibility. Thus, arguably, a parent who decides to defer to a holistic healer rather than a physician remains responsible (and sufficiently free to be responsible) for the health of her child despite lacking direct autonomy, and so, even if we thought that it is crucial to preserve the conditions of responsibility and freedom, it doesn't follow that direct autonomy is necessary.

[19] The list of accounts that I have considered is not exhaustive. Importantly, Mogensen [2017] proposes an authenticity account: testimony-based judgments, on this view, are problematic because not authentic. This account is interesting, but it fails. The value of authenticity is easily overridden by moral values. It is only once moral constraints are met that authenticity can be accorded any weight. So, the account cannot explain why we wouldn't defer systematically if that would maximize the chances of getting to the truth.

commitments, and the story is more nuanced than the version that I am about to offer, but, for present purposes, the following remarks will suffice.

First, by and large, we (in the West) are committed to the idea that, at minimum, every adult without a serious cognitive impairment is capable of making moral judgments.[20] So, everyone is assumed qualified to participate in moral discussions.

More importantly for present purposes, everyone is assumed to have a duty—and not simply a right—to exercise one's moral reasoning capacities. Participation in our collective moral governance is expected of us in much the way that participation in political governance is expected. Moral governance is, in principle, seen as an all-hands-on-deck enterprise in which, ideally, every moral compass (that is, *everyone's* moral compass) is consulted. This includes everyone's arguments, but it also includes everyone's intuitions (for example, a person can say 'I find this conclusion counterintuitive', and that is *prima facie* evidence of a problem). Everyone, that is, is responsible not only for his or her own moral judgments and actions, but for doing one's part to steer the community ship in a morally right direction.[21] We conceive of moral truths as truths to be discovered with everyone's help. This puts pressure on everyone to cultivate his or her own moral reasoning capacities, and not to get into the habit of outsourcing moral reasoning to others.

In order to encourage each other to cultivate and exercise our own moral reasoning abilities, we have practices that forbid, except in special circumstances, that one appeal to another's authority in explaining why one has the moral beliefs that one does, saying, for example, 'I believe the war is just because Beth told me that it is.' This explains *Presumption*.

Note that this is different from—although not unrelated to—accountability for actions. Nickel [2001: 256] suggests that one of the reasons for our qualms about moral deference has to do with accountability practices concerning actions.[22] However, it is possible to have a system in which one agent has practical authority but not epistemic moral authority over others: that is, one person is seen as morally responsible for the actions of others, but others reserve their right not to defer to her when it comes to moral beliefs and judgments. For instance, in Shakespeare's [1599] *Henry V*, two soldiers, Williams and Bates, defer to the King's practical authority but refuse to make any moral judgment about the justness of the war that they are fighting. There is a scene in which the King disguises himself as an ordinary soldier and mixes with the other troops in an attempt to lift their spirits and boost morale. Henry V starts talking to these two soldiers, Williams and Bates. He says to them, 'Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the King's company, his cause being just and his quarrel honourable.' Williams replies, 'That's more than we know.' Bates chimes in: 'Ay, or more than we should seek after. For we know enough if we know we are the King's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.' Here, Williams and Bates accept the King's practical authority, but they refuse to accept anyone's epistemic moral authority and opt to suspend judgment.

[20] What counts as a sufficiently serious cognitive impairment can be debated. The kinds of affective deficits that characterize psychopathy probably do. Early-stage Alzheimer's does not.

[21] Dissenters may do important moral work, because the fact that they voice moral misgivings at a cost (which non-conformism generally carries) gives the rest of us evidence that we might be doing something wrong.

[22] See Groll and Decker [2014: 17–19] for objections to Nickel's interpretation of his own case.

Still, Nickel is onto something. We not only encourage people to make moral judgments for themselves; we encourage them to act on those judgments. Indeed, in some cases, this may mean overriding legitimate practical authority—for instance, disobeying an unjust order given by a military commander. Importantly, however, this feature of our practices does not explain reluctance about moral deference. Rather, the commitments that I listed explain *both* that feature and the reluctance in question. It is because we are committed to collective moral governance that we encourage people to make moral judgments for themselves and to disobey legitimate authority in some cases, such as when receiving unjust orders. We hold people individually accountable, because that is the best way to encourage them to do their part in steering the community ship in the morally right direction. Without individual responsibility, many—like the soldiers Williams and Bates—would refuse to do their part. If Williams and Bates did their part fully, they would make a judgment for themselves and voice objections if they concluded that the war was unjust. But back to our practices.

While moral deference is discouraged, it is not disallowed. Any person, on any particular occasion, may have a strong reason to rely on deference—for instance, when the stakes are high and deference maximizes one's chances of getting to the truth.

All of this stands in contrast with the way in which we discover truths in other domains. When it comes to physics and chemistry, for instance, we do not think that having everyone give their input would maximize our collective chances of getting to the truth. Rather, we believe that our best way of getting to the truth is to rely on people who specialize in these areas. So, we choose to outsource thinking about physics to the people best prepared to do it. This explains *Asymmetry*.

These features of our moral practice are by no means universal. A society may be structured in such a way that the moral reasoning labour is assumed to be unequally divided. We see an endorsement of deference in some traditional religious societies such as Christian or Muslim societies. There, ordinary believers might not be expected to discern what is morally right for themselves but instead to consult a holy book.[23] The idea is that humans might not be well-positioned to grasp moral truths if divine will is the source of those truths.[24] William of Ockham, for instance, famously suggested that moral truths may be quite baffling to us: for example, if God commanded this, it would be right to commit theft and adultery.[25] Religious believers might not even be expected to interpret the holy book for themselves, but rather to defer to an authority such as (for some) the Pope on religious matters. Perhaps one

[23] Arguably, they still exercise what I called *indirect* autonomy.

[24] Kierkegaard [1843], in *Fear and Trembling*, suggests that it is only religious truths that may seem absurd and incomprehensible. Perhaps this argumentative route is open to every Divine Command Theorist. Kierkegaard suggests that religion is not easy, precisely because it may conflict with morality: when God commands Abraham to kill his son Isaac, obeying God is the right thing to do from a religious point of view, not a moral one. One can say, then, that, on Kierkegaard's view, religious believers retain their power to make *moral* judgments for themselves. Still, for Kierkegaard, when morality and religion conflict, a religious person ought to choose religion and so may be said to relinquish the authority to judge what the right thing to do is *all-things-considered*. But the commitments of our community are such that everyone is expected to judge not only what is morally right, but what is right all-things-considered, although here I've been focusing on moral judgments.

[25] Ockham [1986: vol. 5, 323] writes (my translation): 'I say that although hatred, stealing, adultery and the like are seen as bad by common law … they can also be done meritoriously, if they should fall under divine command.' Robert Adams [1987] wants to rule out such a possibility by inviting us to imagine God as loving. I answer that if we imagine God as necessarily being loving, according to *our own lovingness standard*, then we may no longer have Divine Command Theory.

can argue that religious authorities are seen as moral experts, and that this gives evidence of the epistemic reading of pessimism, since, as soon as people recognize moral experts, they see deference as appropriate. But religious authorities such as the Pope are seen as not simply *epistemic* experts. The Pope is a spiritual leader to whom, for many, deference is owed.

No less importantly, a morality may be friendly to moral deference without being religious. Traditional moralities that centre on custom and respect for elders often encourage deference. This is for two reasons. First, moral truths are not seen as subject to future discovery, so the scope of moral reasoning is limited. Second, some individuals (for instance, Confucius) are seen as better positioned than the average person to discern moral truths.[26]

Plato gave a somewhat different argument for moral deference. He did not argue in favour of tradition, but he claimed that some people—the philosophers, to be precise—are better positioned to reason about morality than other people are.[27] So, everyone should listen to those who are more qualified to judge.

We find strands of this way of thinking today as well. Above, I talked about 'our' commitments, but Western societies are pluralistic, and subcultures within those societies may embrace traditional moralities as well as religious moralities, both of which may be friendly to moral deference. John Kekes, for instance, in *A Case for Conservatism*, argues that, much as there are authorities in domains such as medicine, music, or science, so there are moral authorities. He construes deference to authority in general as a matter of exercising what I have called *indirect* autonomy [1994: 141]:

> When people recognize an authority, they do not so much as surrender their judgment, but rather, realize that they do not know how to judge or that their judgment is defective, and that the authority's judgment is better than the one they could have arrived at on their own. As it has been perspicuously put, "He who accepts authority accepts as a sufficient reason for acting or believing something the fact that he has been instructed by somewhat whose claim to do so he acknowledges … It is to act or believe not on the balance of reasons, but rather on the basis of a second-order reason that precisely requires that one disregard the balance of reasons as one sees it. Likewise, to exercise authority is precisely not to have to offer reasons, but to be obeyed or believed because one has a recognized claim to be."

Moral authority is, for Kekes, a species of the genus 'authority'. He writes further [ibid.: 58]:

> People come to recognize the moral authority of others partly because the situations they face make them distrust their own evaluations and understanding and partly because the qualifications of a moral authority make them trust its evaluations and understanding instead.

Where do these considerations leave us? I think that it follows from them that our intuitions about the inappropriateness of moral deference captured by *Presumption* and *Asymmetry* are tied to a particular vision of moral life, a vision on which everyone is expected to play their part in our collective moral governance.

[26] I must note that there is a question of how much autonomy Confucius grants to individuals (or some individuals, in particular, the ones who aspire to be 'gentlemen') in the *Analects*. Fingarette [1972] argues that dropping Western notions of autonomy is a prerequisite to understanding Confucius. Others interpret the *Analects* differently (e.g. Brindley [2011]).

[27] Hills [2009: 124n43] mentions Plato's *Republic* in a footnote but does not provide a response to a person impressed by Plato's argument.

Arguably, this is an answer to a descriptive question: what grounds our actual unease about repeated moral deference? One can, in addition, ask a normative question: what practice is best?[28] Should we discourage deference, or shouldn't we?

Kekes [ibid.] argues that a practice with the features that he describes—that is, one friendly to deference—is perfectly compatible with some visions of the good life. People may, on his view, prefer to live a life of deference, and might flourish in leading such a life. What about Kekes's argument?

I cannot discuss either his view or the normative issue in general in any detail here, but I will note two things. First, a society like the one that he envisions—a little like a society in which not everyone has a right to vote—is in danger of becoming repressive. Some people will be born into it rather than choosing to live there because such a life accords with their own vision of the good, and those people will find that they are expected to morally defer even when they believe that they can see the moral truth better than an authority figure does. There may be something inherently incompatible with dignity about putting pressure on adult men and women to morally defer.

Indeed, even those who live in that society by choice may come to believe that their dignity has been compromised. Consider a memorable passage from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* in which the butler, Stevens, says this about deferring to the man whom he served [1989: 243]:

> Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?

There is a sense in which Stevens's moral agency is a shadow of Lord Darlington's. The point that there is something deficient about this kind of moral life is, in my view, compelling.

Second, and more importantly, a division of the moral reasoning labour along the lines that Kekes envisions—even assuming that people exercise indirect autonomy at every step and that answers to moral questions are not foisted upon them from on high—is suboptimal from a societal point of view. We might get lucky and trust an exceptionally wise *phronimos*, but what if our moral authority turns out to be a selfish, bad person? We have a better chance of arriving at the moral truth if, as I suggested, we are in the habit of consulting everyone's moral compass. Indeed, even the wisest *phronimos* might not be quite wise enough. Moral life is complex. In many situations, a wide variety of perspectives must be considered, and no one person or group of people can be reasonably expected to be able to properly take into account all perspectives. A practice of moral deference, then, might be a problem even if many individual people, given their temperamental proclivities, can be happy in living a life guided by an authority's conception of the right and the good.

5. Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper, I said that none of the main pessimist proposals is satisfactory. I promised to show this, and to offer a new account of pessimist intuitions. I

[28] These two questions are generally run together, although Mogensen [2017] distinguishes them and opts to stick to the former.

have now accomplished my tasks. I argued that the real reason why we have qualms about moral deference has to do with particular commitments underlying our moral governance practices. Other communities whose commitments are different may have a very different attitude toward moral deference, too.

I wish to note here that, given the solution proposed, we are in a good position to appreciate a grain of truth to the alternatives that I rejected. Both the Understanding and the Affect explanation are initially appealing—without either being, on its own, sufficient—because what I called our moral compasses have a cognitive as well as an affective component. Since we expect those compasses to be used, we expect people to rely on both their grasp of moral reasons and on their (usually affect-based) intuitions.

The same is true for virtue, practical wisdom, and autonomy. Although none of these on their own explains *Asymmetry* or *Presumption*, it is true that a society with our set of commitments encourages the cultivation of all of these in a particular way. In a traditional society of the sort advocated for by Kekes, not everyone need pursue direct autonomy; virtue may be accomplished by deferring to a moral authority; and the conception of the good life that an agent espouses might not require the cultivation of practical wisdom over and above the ability to pick moral authorities wisely. Not so for us.

There is a final issue on which I would like to comment briefly before closing this discussion. It has to do with the metaethical implications of the account that I offer. As mentioned in the beginning, in a seminal paper, Sarah McGrath [2011] has argued that our reluctance to form moral beliefs on other people's say-so has to do with a tacit commitment to an anti-realist metaethics. We do not, on her view, believe that there are moral truths, and so there is no reason for us to defer to agents alleged to be in a better position to discern those truths. This is how morality differs from other domains such as science.

As should be clear from the foregoing analysis, I do not think that this is right. We are committed to the search for moral truth, which implies a commitment to the existence of moral truth. The reason why we do not want people to get into the habit of outsourcing moral reasoning to others in general is that, while we admit that, on any particular occasion, a person may maximize her chances of getting things right in that way, we do not think—nor, if I am right, should we think—that a practice of widespread deference maximizes our collective chances.[29]

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