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Internalism and Pessimism

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Abstract

Motivational Internalism is the thesis that, necessarily, moral beliefs are accompanied by motivational states. It is plausible to suppose that while another's testimony might transmit information and justification, it can't transmit motivational states such as moral emotions. Thus, Internalism provides a compelling explanation of "Pessimism," the view that there is something illicit about forming moral beliefs by testimony. This paper presents a nonconstitutive reading of the Internalist thesis and then argues that it supports Pessimism in the form of a defeasible presumption against moral deference. It also argues against views which explain Pessimism by appeal to requirements on moral belief formation.

Keywords

testimony – pessimism – internalism – motivation – emotion

1 Introduction

Motivational Internalism is the view that moral beliefs necessarily involve or require motivational states.¹ As I will understand it, the Internalist makes a claim

¹ It is common in the literature to frame Internalism as the thesis that there is a necessary connection between moral *judgment* and *motivation*. Here I will focus on the connection between moral *belief* or *knowledge* and motivation, in particular, moral *emotions*. Of course, not everyone who accepts Internalism about judgment will accept it about belief or knowledge. Even so, such a person might accept the conditional claim argued for here, that such an Internalism can explain Pessimism. See McDowell (1979), Tresan (2006), and Ryle (2009) for versions of Internalism that focus on knowledge and belief. Furthermore, I assume that

about the *concept* of a moral belief (Tesan 2006). That concept picks out beliefs that are accompanied, in the right way, by motivational states. A belief with moral content isn't a genuine moral belief unless it is accompanied in the right way by the right kind of motivational states. Pessimism is the view that there is something objectionable or illicit about forming moral beliefs by pure testimony, that is, by unreflectively taking another at her word on moral matters. Many philosophers have Pessimistic intuitions. Cases in which someone defers to another on a moral matter bother these people; they think the characters in these examples do something wrong or suboptimal. Other philosophers are optimistic; they don't see what the big deal is. My contention in this paper is that Internalism can explain Pessimistic intuitions while leaving room for the Optimistic ones. The problem with testimony is that it doesn't transmit motivation or feeling. And since our concept of a moral belief involves one or both of these, the suspicion is that testimony isn't a way to form genuine moral beliefs. In a slogan: being told what is good is not enough to get you to love the good. But that leaves room for cases where it can achieve this, when the subject's background motivational states are already properly attuned. This view vindicates Pessimism in the form of a *defeasible presumption* against testimony as a source of moral beliefs, a presumption that is defeated in many of the alleged counterexamples proposed by Optimists.

I proceed as follows. In the next section, I discuss Pessimism and argue against understanding it in terms of norms governing belief formation. Section 3 covers Internalism. It is a matter of considerable controversy how best to understand the view, in particular how to understand the way that cognitive states must involve or be accompanied by motivational ones. I motivate one version and consider two ways it could be developed. Section 4 argues that Internalism explains Pessimism. Section 5 vindicates Optimistic intuitions without surrendering Pessimism. I conclude by suggesting that this strategy for explaining Pessimism can be generalized to cases other than moral knowledge.

2 Pessimism

If you're a Pessimist, you think there's something objectionable about deferring to another on moral matters, something that is not found in cases of

emotions are motivational states and that any fleshed-out version of Internalism will need to specify which motivational states are involved in moral belief. The focus on the generic idea of a pro-attitude in the literature is, I take it, an artefact of the level of abstraction at which the debate takes place. We'll have reason later to consider more concrete proposals.

deference about ordinary empirical matters.² Let's start with a fairly typical example. Mark, who lacks any commitments or opinions on the matter, considers whether eating meat is morally permissible.³ He asks his friend, Cindy. Cindy tells him, without elaboration or argument, that eating meat is morally impermissible. Because he trusts her, Mark accepts Cindy's testimony. He stops eating meat.

Something objectionable or at least odd has happened in a case like this. As Alison Hills puts it, “[c]oncerning a distinctively moral question ... it seems important to make up your own mind rather than put your trust in others” (2013, 552). While it would be commonplace and unobjectionable for Mark to take Cindy at her word about the time of day, the outcome of an election, or even quite technical and important matters, moral deference is different. To feel the full force of the intuition, it helps to be clear on just what we're imagining. Mark's is a case of what Sarah McGrath calls “pure” testimony (2009). This involves accepting another's claim without further reflection. Pure testimony is common: it happens when someone tells us her birthday. This contrasts with hearing a bit of testimony, reflecting on the matter oneself, and coming to one's own conclusion. There is nothing problematic about impure or reflective moral knowledge by testimony.

Some further preliminaries are worth mentioning. First, in this paper I will focus primarily on cases where what is said involves only *thin* moral concepts, such as right, wrong, good, and bad, rather than *thick* concepts such as courageous, arrogant, or perverted. Second, I assume Cognitivism about moral judgments and Realism in moral ontology. Moral beliefs aspire to represent the mind-independent world and there is a realm of moral facts to be represented. Furthermore, I assume that at least sometimes things go well in these attempts and that there is moral knowledge. Finally, I do not make any assumptions here about what is required for testimony to serve as a source of knowledge. Everything I say is consistent with Reductionist and Nonreductionist views, for example.⁴

Assuming you share the Pessimistic intuition, we might ask about its substance. How should we articulate the vague feeling of unease about testimony? We can start with how *not* to. Pessimists do not hold that one should never

² Thus, Pessimism, as I will understand it, is a conjunctive thesis: there is something objectionable about moral deference and this feature is not found in ordinary empirical deference.

³ I suppose that if Mark is a carnivore then he isn't wholly noncommittal. Nevertheless, it may not have occurred to him that eating meat is a *moral* issue one way or the other.

⁴ For a helpful overview of the debate, see Adler (2012). See Hopkins (2007) for discussion of it in relation to the question of Moral Testimony Pessimism.

defer to others on moral matters.⁵ It seems undeniable that there are many cases where moral testimony is not only permissible, but laudable. There may be quite technical or recherché ethical questions that are best settled by experts. (Though I assume that Mark's case isn't like this.) Relying on testimony may manifest humility and open-mindedness, which are praiseworthy traits. Furthermore, it might just turn out that, after a great deal of reflection and thought, one cannot arrive at a decision about some pressing matter. In such a case, it might be perfectly acceptable to rely on another's testimony. As Robert Hopkins points out, Pessimism, however understood, is constrained by the principle that "ought implies can" (Hopkins 2007). If relying on yourself is not an option, then there may be no reason not to defer. The Pessimist only holds that it is often or typically problematic to rely on pure testimony.

In the rest of this section I'll consider, in broad strokes, some approaches to understanding and explaining Pessimism. My goal is only to give a sense of the terrain and to motivate the search for an alternative.

If there's a problem with moral testimony, you might think that it violates either a moral norm or an epistemic norm. Of course, matters are complicated, since it might be a moral norm on belief formation or an epistemic norm that only governs moral beliefs (Hopkins 2007; Hills 2009.) But starting with the uncomplicated versions will be fine for the present point, which is that there are *prima facie* difficulties either way.

Start with the claim that deference is morally objectionable. The idea here is that by deferring to another, one abrogates one's responsibility to think for oneself and thereby fails by the lights of some moral ideal such as authenticity (Mogensen 2015), practical wisdom (Hopkins 2011), or virtue (Howell 2015). The problem, however, is that if there is such a norm or requirement, it could only plausibly govern the behavior and reasoning of a perfectly rational and well-informed agent. But, first, we aren't such agents, and, second, it's unclear why an ethical ideal includes stringent epistemic demands. On the first point: we are often ignorant, confused, irrational, and otherwise imperfect. We are often in need of the word of others to help us on our way. After all, in other areas of inquiry we depend, in deep and extensive ways, on others. It would surely be surprising if moral inquiry was completely dissimilar. So it is plausible to suppose that any ideal of virtue, authenticity, or wisdom to which we might reasonably aspire, and against which we might fairly be judged, must make room for deference, in at least some cases. On the second point: why suppose that, say, the *phronimos* is omniscient or completely epistemically autonomous? Plausibly, the relevant ideals must make room for deference, if the virtuous

5 Contra Sliwa (2012).

agent sometimes relies on a trusted advisor. But then it seems that the ideal can't explain Pessimism. This means that an adequate account of Pessimism should explain why deference isn't objectionable when it isn't, why deference on the part of the virtuous is unobjectionable.

On the other hand, one might think that the problem with deference is broadly epistemic. Prominent here is the view defended by Allison Hills that moral testimony doesn't transmit moral understanding (2009, 2013). This view begins with the claim that testimony in general cannot transmit understanding of the speaker's reasons. The relevant form of understanding is understanding why, such as understanding why it is the case that *p*. To possess this kind of understanding is to be equipped with a set of abilities, such as the abilities to evaluate arguments for *p*, to consider the consequences of nearby counterfactuals, to form true beliefs in relevantly similar cases, and so on (2009: 102). Understanding is *productive* in a way that mere knowledge is not. The problem with Mark is that he lacks the abilities that come with moral understanding.

Hills' proposal has received a fair amount of discussion, but here I just want to register the worry that it falls out of a claim about testimony in general. For this reason, it struggles to explain what is distinctively objectionable about moral deference. If there's a significant debate between Optimists and Pessimists, it must concern a difference *in kind* between testimony in the moral domain and ordinary empirical knowledge (Hopkins 2011; Groll and Decker 2014).⁶

A subtler distinction, owing to Robert Hopkins (2007, 2011), is between "availability" and "usability" Pessimism. According to availability pessimists, testimony is not a source of moral knowledge at all. The problem with deference is simply that one cannot gain moral knowledge by its means. Usability pessimists grant that one can gain moral knowledge by testimony, but hold that there are non-epistemic norms forbidding one from forming beliefs by its means. Hopkins has convincingly argued that availability pessimism is implausible. Suppose you are speaking with a reliable and morally upstanding interlocutor. You have no reason to distrust her. If this person provides you with a bit of moral testimony, then you can construct an argument which takes

6 This is not a decisive reason to reject Hills' view, however. For Hills argues that there is an important difference between moral and other cases, namely that moral understanding is more important than ordinary understanding. That's because moral understanding is required for a good will and virtue (Hills 2009). Again, I am not offering anything like a conclusive argument against these proposals, but rather raising worries about a style of explanation of Pessimism that will motivate the search for an alternative. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

as premises that she is reliable and that she has made a moral claim to the conclusion that the claim she makes is true. Given the availability of such an argument, it is extremely difficult to see why a subject who followed it would fail to have knowledge. I assume, then, that availability pessimism is false, and that testimony can equip one with knowledge of moral propositions.

The Usability Pessimist accepts the possibility of gaining moral knowledge by testimony.⁷ The problem with testimony is not narrowly epistemic, concerning the requirements of the possession and transmission of knowledge or justification. Instead, cases like Mark's violate a non-epistemic norm governing belief. Hopkins suggests the following:

The Requirement: having the right to a moral belief requires one to grasp the moral grounds for it (Hopkins 2011: 630).

The requirement doesn't say that a subject who defers to another, and so fails to possess genuinely moral grounds, lacks knowledge. Rather, she lacks a right to her belief, where having a right means being permitted to form it on the basis of testimony. Mark has knowledge, but not a right to it, because he isn't a properly moral judge on the topic of eating meat.

I think that Hopkins' proposal, like others which appeal to "grasping" the right kind of reasons is on to something. (Indeed, as we'll see, the view defended here can be understood as articulating a non-epistemic version of it.) However, I don't think it can be right as it stands, for two reasons. First, Hopkins conceives the Requirement as a non-epistemic norm governing belief formation, and there is reason to doubt there are any such requirements. Second, in order to be at all plausible, the idea of "grasping moral reasons" has to be so capacious that the Requirement doesn't come to much more than a restatement of Pessimism.

Hopkins is live to the first worry (2011: 145). It is plausible to suppose that only considerations that bear on the truth of a proposition can get a grip on

⁷ You might think that anyone who grants this isn't really a "Pessimist." But Pessimism is to be distinguished from Skepticism, as the distinction between availability and usability Pessimism suggests. The usability Pessimist holds that forming moral beliefs by testimony violates a norm such that, at least in some circumstances, the subject is prevented from forming a moral belief that way. And any view meriting the label "Pessimist" will hold that moral deference is defective or of lesser value such that there is reason, again, perhaps only in certain circumstances, against using it as a method of moral belief formation. This is so even if one can gain *knowledge* by deferring. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting the clarification here.

one in the midst of doxastic deliberation.⁸ This would mean that there just aren't any legitimate requirements like the Requirement. In defense of it, Hopkins provides another example from outside of moral epistemology: expertise. You are, no doubt, an expert on philosophy. Suppose you are trying to figure out the correct answer to this question: what is wrong with moral testimony? Lucky for you, I am highly reliable about these sorts of things and I've got an answer for you. The thought goes that, because you are an expert, you have a responsibility not to simply defer to another, even someone as reliable and trustworthy as me. Assuming that you can gain knowledge from me, or at least a justified belief, it seems clear that such a requirement can't be narrowly epistemic. Thus, the category of non-epistemic norms of belief formation is occupied and unproblematic.

But the example does not convince, because it fails to take into account the difference between the norms governing belief formation and those governing inquiry. Trying to answer the question isn't just something you're idly occupying your time with: it's part of your job or social role. To defer wouldn't simply be lazy, it would be academically dishonest. Plausibly, then, the norm requiring you to continue on with your research is a practical one, governing your action, not your beliefs. Of course, insofar as you are continuing to pursue the question, you have to see it as open, to a degree, and hence you can't take my testimony to have settled the matter. But I don't think it entails that you have responded to a norm governing belief formation here. Arguably, at least in the cases that come readily to mind, the kind of inquiry where expertise is relevant is directed at questions that cannot be decisively settled by another's testimony. (Nobody is an expert on the score of last night's baseball game.) And where a question can be so settled, and one is in a position to appreciate this, one's expertise is no impediment to deference. The more like this case we imagine yours to be, the less plausible it is that you are justified in ignoring my testimony.

The other issue lies with the notion of a moral reason. One might say that the problem with Mark is that he cannot offer an explanation of why it is wrong to eat meat. His reasons aren't reasons for it being the case that he ought not eat meat; they are only reasons for believing so. But this is too high-minded a demand to place on our moral beliefs. After all, many of our beliefs are based on intuitions (Mogensen 2015). One has a sense that it is wrong to do something,

⁸ This might be understood as a psychological claim, about what is possible for an agent in the midst of conscious deliberation (Steglich-Peterson 2009), or a normative one, about what one ought to do when deliberating. Either claim would rule out the requirement, the latter directly and the former by appeal to the principle that ought implies can.

but this sense is quite inarticulate. Hopkins recognizes this, and grants that his notion of grasping a reason includes it (Hopkins 2007: 632). The problem, though, is that we need an independent characterization of what grasping a moral reason is which clearly rules out deference. And once we ditch the high-minded view it is unclear that we have one. For while one might say that moral beliefs based on intuition exercise a sensitivity to moral reasons, so too does moral deference: Mark is sensitive to the advice of morally upstanding interlocutors. The suspicion is that the idea of a moral reason will have to be conveyed ostensibly. It's the kind of thing you grasp in intuition, moral perception, moral reasoning, and so on, but not testimony. And the worry is that to say this isn't to make much of an advance over our original statement of Pessimism. "Absence of moral reason" is the name of our problem, not its solution.^{9,10}

All these accounts attempt to explain Pessimism by identifying a norm governing processes of belief formation. A natural alternative is to focus, instead, on the *products*. Rather than epistemology or normative ethics, we should look to philosophy of mind or moral psychology. The basic idea here is that there is a distinction to be drawn between two kinds of moral belief. We prefer one over the other, for broadly moral reasons. If, typically or often, testimony results in the kind of moral belief that we value less, then this would offer an explanation of Pessimism. As I see it, to go in for such an explanation does not commit one to the existence of non-epistemic requirements on belief formation. That is for the simple reason that the explanation appeals to the *non-epistemic value* of one state of mind. Accordingly, I will take myself to have established Pessimism if I can show that there is a presumption that deference isn't a means to what is an intuitively exalted or valuable state of mind. I turn, now, to a characterization of that state.

3 Internalism

It is widely agreed that there is some sort of intimate connection between moral judgment or belief and motivation. If you're watching a commercial about the victims of a natural disaster and you think, "I really ought to help them,"

⁹ This worry confronts Hills' appeal to understanding, as well, as Mogensen (2015) notes.

¹⁰ Suppose we say that in cases of deference the subject grasps a reason why she should believe a moral proposition rather than grasping why that proposition is true. The worry is that moral intuition is a legitimate source of moral beliefs, but in moral intuition one needn't grasp why a proposition is true. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising the response on behalf of Hopkins.

then, if you're sincere, you'll be motivated, to some degree, to help. Perhaps you won't end up following through, but you will be motivated. Intuitions about cases like this motivate Motivational Internalism, the thesis that there is a necessary connection between moral judgment or belief and motivation. Internalism can be understood a number of different ways. In this section I'll outline and motivate the version I think best explains Pessimism.

A longstanding worry in the literature is that Motivational Internalism is inconsistent with Moral Cognitivism, the view that moral judgments are truth apt claims that purport to represent the mind-independent world.¹¹ The two are thought to be incompatible if one accepts the further, widely endorsed view that beliefs and desires are distinct existences, the so-called "Humean theory of motivation."¹² The alleged incompatibility of these three claims arises because it is natural to interpret Internalism as a thesis about the *constitution* of moral judgments and beliefs. A subject who forms a moral judgment is guaranteed to be motivated because these judgments just are, in part, motivational states. But the Humean theory implies that no such state could be a genuine belief, contradicting Cognitivism. In response, some Cognitivists have rejected the Humean view, holding that moral judgments have both cognitive and conative aspects (Nagel 1970; McNaughton 1988; Dancy 1993). (These states have earned the unbeautiful label "besires.") Call this a "constitutional" reading of Internalism (Bjorklund et al. 2013).

In recent years, philosophers have proposed a weaker, nonconstitutional reading of Internalism. For example, Jon Tresan distinguishes *de re* from *de dicto* interpretations of Internalism.¹³ On the *de re* reading, any moral belief or judgment, that is, any judgment that affirms a moral proposition, is necessarily accompanied by motivation. This is what the Constitutional reading holds. On the *de dicto* reading, by contrast, necessarily, anything that is a moral belief is accompanied by motivation. The *de dicto* reading is driven by our concept of a moral judgment or belief: nothing would count as one unless it was accompanied, in the right way, by motivation. That leaves in place the possibility of a belief with moral content that is unaccompanied by motivation; such a state

¹¹ This may be the reason why the proposal offered here hasn't been considered in the literature on moral testimony, though see Fletcher (2016).

¹² See Smith (1994) and Shafer-Landau (2003) for a helpful overview of the issues.

¹³ Tresan (2006); see also Radcliffe (2006) and Bjorklund et al. (2013). Although the view I sketch is inspired by these accounts, it is different. For example, Tresan holds that Internalism is to be explained at the group level. The necessary connection is between the practice of moral belief and moral motivation, which allows for gaps in individual cases. I assume that Internalism is a truth about the psychology of individuals.

would simply not count as a moral belief by the lights of our concepts. Tresan's analogy: an object does not *count* as a planet unless it orbits a star. But, of course, that is not because the objects that are planets have special properties that guarantee they orbit a star. It is perfectly possible for the Earth to exist in a starless possible world. It is just that, in such a world, Earth would not be a planet. The necessity between planethood and orbiting a star is *de dicto*, not *de re* (2006: 145).

There are reasons to favor the nonconstitutional reading. First, it avoids many of the counterexamples facing the constitutional view. Second, it is plausible to suppose that the intuitions that support Internalism only favor the weaker reading (Tresan 2006). The amoralist is a character who seems to possess moral concepts and is able to speak competently about what is right and wrong, yet lacks any motivation to act on what he says. When one thinks about such a case—e.g. someone who says, “well, of course, it’s *wrong* to eat meat, but what do I care?”—one is inclined to say that, in some sense, they don’t *really* hold a moral belief. This supports Internalism, since *ex hypothesi*, the only thing missing is motivation. But the weaker claim can explain the intuition adequately. In endorsing the intuition, we commit to a claim about the concept of a moral belief but not any particular claims about how such beliefs are realized in the mind, for example, whether they are constituted by desires. This allows a distinction between two species of moral belief, one for which Internalism holds and another for which it doesn’t. This is the distinction I’ll exploit in explaining Pessimism. For present purposes, then, let us assume the nonconstitutional view.¹⁴

While the view avoids controversial commitments in the philosophy of mind, questions linger. A fully fleshed-out version of the view would have to explain which beliefs in which moral contents are accompanied by which motivational states (Tresan 2006). Internalism holds that genuine moral beliefs involve or are accompanied by motivational states, but denies that the form of accompaniment is constitution. The immediate worry facing the proposal is that on it the concept of a moral belief is *ad hoc*. If there is only a contingent relation between belief and motivation, the concept of a moral belief might look like the concept of a “cheeseburger belief,” where someone holds a cheeseburger belief if and only if her belief that there is a cheeseburger nearby is accompanied by a desire to eat one. Articulating the most attractive version

¹⁴ Hereafter, “Internalism” refers to this view.

of Internalism is beyond the scope of the present essay. Here I'll just sketch two ways it might be pursued.¹⁵

We are looking for a nonconstitutive way of understanding the dependence between belief and motivation. The natural thought is that, though they are "distinct existences," the two states are parts of some further mental achievement. For example, Elisabeth Radcliffe has offered the following interpretation of Hume's view of moral judgment:

... Hume's theory has it that the sentiment of self-disapprobation is a motive to change my behaviour, and it produces in me a cognitive judgment of myself. The judgment is contingently connected to the motive, but the concept of moral *judging* is conceptually connected to the idea of having a certain affective state, which is also motive to behave according to the judgment. In other words, even though I might have the belief that I ought to reform my behaviour, based on causal factors other than my feeling of disapprobation, we cannot identify my acquisition of that belief as *moral judging*.

RADCLIFFE (2006: 369)

For our purposes neither the attribution of the view to Hume nor the focus on disapprobation matters. The basic idea, though, is compelling. What makes a judgment *moral* is that it originates in and is guided by moral emotions such as guilt, sympathy, pity, compassion, respect, and the like. The absence of the emotions indicates that the judgment is not genuinely moral, even though the judgment is not constituted by the emotions.¹⁶ A moral judgment or belief is a complex state of mind with a certain etiology.

Another option, this time inspired by Aristotle, is to hold that a moral belief has to be understood as an element in a more general ethical outlook that

¹⁵ As Tresan (2006: 162) points out, someone who accepts the nonconstitutional view is free to pilfer resources from Noncognitivists, Quasi-Realists, or Expressivists in order to give an account of the motivational state involved in moral belief. I focus on two views which, it seems to me, are both independently plausible and easily make sense of the thought that genuine moral knowledge is especially valuable.

¹⁶ The Humean view identifies moral beliefs by features of the method by means of which they are formed. But it doesn't entail Pessimism even if we add the claim that beliefs so-formed possess a distinctive value. That's because the view only claims that something, the feeling of disapprobation, must be involved in the relevant method. It leaves open the question which methods involve feeling. Though see Fletcher (2016) for a Sentimentalist explanation of Pessimism.

is constituted by both cognitive and conative states. The achievement in this case would be the possession of a virtuous character. On this view, Internalism falls out of a conception of the virtuous agent as someone who is moved by a proper appreciation of her circumstances. For example, John McDowell (1978, 1979) has argued that the possession of a virtue consists in a sensitivity to the requirements that one's circumstances impose on one. This sensitivity equips the virtuous agent with a conception of her circumstances which is sufficient to motivate her to act in the way she ought. McDowell calls the sensitivity perceptual (1979) and denies that its efficacy requires support from an antecedent desire (1978). Though some philosophers inspired by him have interpreted this version of Internalism along constitutional lines (Platts 1980; McNaughton 1988), it needn't be (Little 1997). Crucial here is the idea that the exercise of the virtuous person's sensitivity is made possible by the achievement of a broad ethical outlook including, however inchoate, an understanding of how to live. On the plausible assumption that such an understanding requires motivational and emotional propensities, this makes room for a dependence between cognition and motivation without constitutive relations.

Both views describe a kind of dependence between cognition and motivation that makes intelligible the thought that our concept of a moral belief picks out an intrinsically motivational state, even if it refers to the overall state of mind of the subject rather than a single discrete, and exotic, mental occurrence. Because it explains Internalism neither by appeal to constitutive relations nor the content of moral beliefs, this approach easily makes room for beliefs with moral content without motivation, that is, beliefs with moral content that aren't "moral beliefs."¹⁷ Furthermore, plausibly, both species of belief may on occasion count as knowledge. Let us mark the difference as follows. Call the moral knowledge that satisfies Internalism "moral knowledge in the exalted sense" and the knowledge that doesn't "knowledge of a moral proposition." In the next section I'll argue that Pessimistic intuitions are rooted in the suspicion that moral knowledge by testimony is of the latter kind.

¹⁷ As I understand the difference between them, the Aristotelian but not the Humean holds that the difference between these cases entails a further *cognitive* difference. The virtuous agent conceives of her circumstances differently than the agent who is unmoved. McDowell (1979), Little (1997).

4 Explaining Pessimism

Here's an argument for Pessimism: Moral knowledge in the exalted sense is accompanied by a certain kind of motivational state. Testimony can't transmit motivation. So knowledge of a moral proposition based on pure deference can't be moral knowledge in the exalted sense. Assuming that moral knowledge in the exalted sense merits the label, about which more in a moment, we get an explanation of Pessimism. There's something valuable that you can't achieve through deference, which is why it is always second best. Notice that this is not because of any epistemic constraints that deference fails to satisfy, nor is it because of requirements on belief formation. It's explained by a difference in the mental states arrived at by deference and ordinary moral reflection and our preference for the latter.

I don't think this argument is valid, though. That's because a testimonial belief can be accompanied by motivation in the right way even if the motivation isn't transmitted by testimony. I'll discuss that more in the next section. But the argument does get at something important, which is that testimony alone can't be a way of putting you into a state of exalted moral knowledge. That requires something else. And that explains the presumption that beliefs formed by deference aren't exalted. Something else needs to be in place already and you'd need to know that it's in place in order to offer the praise that the exalted status merits.

Whether this explanation is a good one depends on the plausibility of three claims: that exalted moral knowledge is really exalted, that testimony can't transmit the requisite form of motivation, and that the paradigmatic cases, like Mark's, plausibly involve beliefs that aren't genuine moral beliefs.

What's so special about genuine moral belief? Unfortunately, I don't have much to say on this front. Our previous discussion of Humean and Aristotelian interpretations of the Internalist thesis make plausible the thought that we take genuine moral knowledge to be exalted because we have an ideal of a virtuous person that it satisfies. This seems to be the idea behind both the Aristotelian and Humean views. Whether that ideal is worthwhile is something I won't consider here. I will simply assume that exalted moral knowledge merits the title.

On to the second claim. Emotion and desire just don't seem to be the kinds of things that are transferred in a testimonial exchange. That is not to deny the obvious fact that another's words can *cause* one to experience certain emotions. But three points are worth bearing in mind. First, it seems clear that success in the testimonial exchange does not require that the hearer feel any

particular emotions or desires at all, other than those that bear on the exchange directly. Mark gains knowledge by means of Cindy's testimony regardless of which emotions he experiences. Second, paradigm cases in which one person causes an emotion in another require sermonizing or exhorting, not mere telling. Third, there isn't anything about the structure of this activity that requires the emotion that the hearer forms to be *shared* with the speaker, the way that linguistic and social conventions ensure sharing of content. For example, if Cindy is anything like some of the vegetarians I know, then her tone and stance will express the kind of righteous disapproval that, we may suppose, makes people like Mark feel very ashamed indeed. But this is not something *shared* between Mark and Cindy, nor is it *transmitted* from Cindy to Mark. Cindy isn't ashamed at all. Maybe she's ashamed of Mark, but this is quite a different animal from the shame that Mark comes to feel.

Perhaps emotion cannot *literally* be transferred by testimony. But, one might ask, what is wrong with forming the emotions in response to or after forming the belief? This might mean that testimony only *indirectly* leads to genuine moral belief, but so what? After all, one might suppose that such mediation by belief is common: you perceive some circumstances, form a moral belief, and then have an emotional response. This could only be ruled out by a controversial Sentimentalist moral epistemology on which emotional experience must form the basis of moral belief.

I don't think the explanation here presupposes Sentimentalism or any other view about the correct methods for forming moral beliefs.¹⁸ Indeed, my brief is precisely that Pessimism has nothing to do with requirements on moral belief formation. Instead, the explanation is as follows. Suppose Cindy tells Mark that it is wrong to eat meat. He comes to believe this, and then, in whatever way, comes to feel some moral emotion, say, disgust at the practice of meat eating or sympathy for the suffering animals. My contention is that, were such a process to occur, the emotion so formed could not be rational because it is not a fitting response to its ground, Cindy's testimony. To make this case we need two claims, neither of which is wholly uncontroversial, but both of which are highly plausible and widely endorsed. The first claim is that emotions can be assessable as rational or irrational to the extent that they are appropriate or fitting responses to the facts or objects that give rise to them. Emotions ought to "fit" their objects, relative to the other desires and beliefs of the subject. Sorrow is a fitting response to loss; anger is a fitting response to offense or intentional harm; sympathy is a fitting response to the suffering of others. The presence of these features rationalize the relevant emotions. The second claim is that

¹⁸ Again, see Fletcher (2016) for many of the same considerations raised here but put in the service of a Sentimentalist explanation of Pessimism.

the grounds or reasons for emotions are worldly facts or objects and not beliefs. Your reason for being angry is the offense caused by the other driver; your reason for sorrow is the death of your spouse. It is the fact, not the belief, that renders the emotion appropriate or not.¹⁹

The upshot is that in the case we are imagining, the moral emotion formed has to be understood as a response either to the fact that Cindy has offered testimony or the bare fact that the action is immoral, the fact conveyed by Cindy's testimony. But the moral emotion, say sympathy, is a fitting response to neither. We can get at this in two steps, considering testimony involving thin and thick moral concepts.

Start with thin concepts, which have been our primary focus. Suppose that a trusted friend mentions an act or practice with which you are wholly unfamiliar. She doesn't describe it in any detail, merely mentioning it by name. Let's call it "flopping." Your friend tells you that she was reading an account of a case of flopping and that the practice is an immoral one. Against the availability Pessimist, we should grant that you can come to know that it is wrong to flop. I trust that it is obvious that it is not rational for you to feel any particular moral emotion about the act of flopping. Should you be disgusted, bemused, horrified, righteously angry? Since these emotions are fitting responses to the presence of thick evaluative properties, you are not yet in a position to rationally feel anything in particular. This is the situation Mark finds himself in, which is why he is debarred from forming a genuine moral belief.

Next, suppose that your friend tells you that "flopping is a disgusting practice." Again, let's suppose you can gain knowledge this way. Is it rational, upon forming the belief, to feel disgust about flopping? Hardly. Here, though, you have awareness, of some form, of the existence of the property to which disgust is a fitting response. Why then does it seem rationally amiss to feel the emotion? Presumably the problem is that you don't have the right kind of awareness of the relevant property. What goes missing is something suggested by the Requirement discussed earlier. In the literature on aesthetic testimony this is put as the claim that one is not entitled to an aesthetic judgment unless one has actually experienced the object in some relevant way, such as sight or hearing (Wollheim 1980; Hopkins 2011). As we've seen, there is reason to doubt the Requirement as a thesis about moral belief formation. But the claim about acquaintance is extremely plausible if formulated as a claim about the rationality of emotion.²⁰ For example, disgust is only rationally appropriate if it is based on some suitable kind of sensible awareness of its object. In one way "acquaintance" is a misnomer for the form of awareness we have in mind, since

¹⁹ There are many thorny issues about the ontology of reasons that I can't consider here.

²⁰ A similar point is made by Whiting (2015) and Fletcher (2016).

imagination counts as a suitable form of awareness. If your friend goes on to describe what flopping involves and you imagine it, then a feeling of disgust is rational and intelligible. What matters isn't actually perceptually confronting an instance of the act in question, but representing it in perception or imagination as an object for your own inspection. The claim then is that testimony is not sufficient to transmit genuine moral belief because the awareness of its object that it provides cannot be a rational ground of the emotions that constitute genuine moral belief.

Finally, even granting this, one might think that in our original example Mark forms a genuine moral belief by the lights of the version of Internalism endorsed here. This is especially plausible if you favor a more stripped-down version of the view that appeals to motivation instead of moral emotions. Suppose again that Cindy tells Mark that it is impermissible to eat meat. Mark takes what she says at face value, judges that it's impermissible, and forms the belief that it is. On the view on offer, we're Pessimistic about Mark because (or to the extent that) his belief isn't a genuine moral belief. His state of mind lacks the relevant motivational components to satisfy Internalism. That might sound strange, since we assumed at the beginning that, on the basis of Cindy's say-so, Mark *stops eating meat*. So forming the belief must have led Mark to form the required motivations. It's not as if Mark is an amoralist. So the view seems to give the wrong verdict in our paradigm case.

But this would be too quick. We can grant that Mark is in a motivational state that keeps him from eating meat but deny that this state, along with the testimonial belief, is sufficient to put him in a genuine moral belief state. There are different options here, both for interpreting Mark's psychology and the demands of Internalism. The least charitable interpretation would be that Mark is moved by his desire to avoid Cindy's criticism. It's clear that this wouldn't involve the right kind of relation between motivation and cognition. Second, more charitably, he may be moved by a higher-order desire to refrain from what is morally wrong, *de dicto*, which, in conjunction with the belief that it is wrong to eat meat, motivates him to refrain. But as Michael Smith (1994) has pointed out, a case like this doesn't merit the label "moral motivation" at all, but is instead the product of rule fetishism. I suspect that many cases of moral deference fall into one of these two categories. And, of course, the third option is to go in for a version of Internalism on which moral emotion is required for moral belief.

5 Reasons for Optimism

The view defended here can explain Pessimism without appealing to non-epistemic norms of belief formation, of which there may be none. It can also

explain why moral deference is different in kind from deference about empirical matters of fact, since moral belief is a distinctive kind of belief state. A third reason to favor it is that it makes sense of Optimistic intuitions. Taking another at her word is not sufficient for moral knowledge in the exalted sense. But that leaves open the possibility that, as it were, the required motivational states may be provided by the hearer and not the speaker. We can see this by considering two examples from the literature.

Karen Jones (1999: 59–60) describes a case in which a man, Peter, fails to recognize cases of subtle sexism in applicants for a shared living situation. His housemates offer him testimony, but Peter refuses to listen. Jones invites us to recognize that Peter is wrong not to defer.²¹ Let us assume that, in at least some sense, Peter can see his way to the truth himself and matters are not so pressing that such reflection is out of the question. That is, let us not assume that we can explain the permissibility of deference here by appeal to the “ought implies can” requirement. Instead, whatever was thought to be objectionable about deference is simply missing here, at least on some interpretations of what’s going on.

Robert Hopkins provides an example of a conflicted trade unionist who must decide whether to join a strike (Hopkins 2007). He is live to the importance of loyalty to his brothers and sisters but also moved by the harm that the strike will cause those whom his work benefits. Suppose that this man cannot come to a decision on his own, but observes that all the others in his union have agreed to strike. May he do so? Hopkins seems to think that the answer is “no,” though I would contend that it depends on how we describe the case. It seems to me that, given that he is properly sensitive to the demands of both sides, the unionist is permitted to let the testimony of those he trusts tilt the scales.

In both of these examples we are faced with a protagonist who already possesses the emotional and motivational propensities for moral belief. Peter is a committed anti-sexist who is concerned about his roommates. The unionist is loyal to his union and compassionate toward his clients. In these cases, we can easily imagine that deferring to another allows the subject to form a genuine moral belief and act in a way that is informed, not only by testimony, but by the relevant emotional and motivational states as well. As we might put it, in

²¹ In Jones’ version, Peter believes that the male applicants are not sexist and are being treated unfairly (*ibid.*) Deference here requires rejecting his considered view without understanding that of another. But cases of deferring to those with whom one disagrees raise a host of issues that would need to be untangled from the issue at hand. The problem with testimony is not a problem of being overly conciliatory.

these cases, the subject is in the proper conative and emotional state to receive another's testimony. A genuine moral belief is here "triggered" by testimony. The testimony contributes to her overall ethical outlook and results in moral belief rather than the acquisition of an isolated piece of information. Thus, our view can make sense of Optimistic intuitions without surrendering the central Pessimistic thesis. The cases that impress Optimists are not counterexamples to the thesis. The thesis articulates a presumption, which is defeated in the cases. This is as it should be for two reasons we have already canvassed. First, we should think of Pessimism as a presumption rather than a prohibition against testimony. Second, we should find room for the idea that even the virtuous may need to defer. Our view provides a plausible description of such cases. Since the virtuous are not omniscient, they may require the epistemic support of others. But this is no barrier to the possession of moral knowledge in the exalted sense, since we may suppose that their emotional and motivational lives are properly attuned to receive that information from others in the right way.

One might worry, though, that, as I have described them, these are no longer cases of pure deference. If Peter and the Unionist form genuine moral beliefs, then they are relying on more than the testimony of others. But I think this is not right. We should grant that, in virtue of the emotional and motivational states they are in, these people have moral reasons available to them. Peter can appreciate the harm that would result from letting in a bad roommate and the Unionist can feel the pull of loyalty. But these reasons are available only in the sense that, by having the emotional and motivational propensities, the subject possess additional, propositional justification for their moral beliefs. Since they form the belief by taking another at their word, their doxastic justification is restricted to the testimony.²²

6 Generalizing

Morality isn't the only domain where Pessimistic intuitions arise. Many philosophers are Pessimists about aesthetic testimony (Scruton 1976; Wollheim 1980; Hopkins 2011). And a central tenet of talk therapy is that transformative self-knowledge must be achieved by the patient herself; it cannot be

²² This point distinguishes the present proposal from the requirement that moral beliefs be based on moral reasons. I grant that such reasons must be available to one, but only in the sense that one's overall state of mind must involve the right kind of sensitivity to them. But this can happen even if one's belief is not based on those reasons. They are reasons that, on reflection, one would see as supporting one's belief, though they needn't be the reasons on the basis of which one formed the belief in the first place.

transmitted by the therapist (Freud 1966). It would surely count in favor of an account of Pessimism if it generalized to other cases. I think the view defended here does just this. At the core of the present proposal is the idea, familiar from Internalism, that moral knowledge differs from ordinary knowledge as a state of mind. We value moral belief not because of the methods by means of which it arises, its epistemic qualities, or its adherence to norms of belief formation. Rather, we value it because of the features it has as a mental state, features that distinguish it from ordinary empirical knowledge. Thus, the view seems to make a prediction: Pessimistic intuitions will arise in those domains where there is a species of knowledge that is constituted by more than garden variety belief states. And that prediction is plausibly borne out for both aesthetic knowledge and self-knowledge. It is a common idea that first-person knowledge is distinctive in a number of ways: it allows for the expression of mental states (Bar-On 2004); it involves the exercise of mental agency (Moran 2001); it involves the endorsement or ratification of first-order contents (Peacocke 1998; Moran 2001). If these features characterize that knowledge *qua* mental state, if we have reason to value such a mental state, and if testimony cannot transmit these features, then it would make sense that we are Pessimistic about self-knowledge. Likewise, on the Kantian view, genuine aesthetic judgment must be distinguished from an ordinary belief with aesthetic content, much as the Internalist proposal here draws such a line in the moral case. Genuine aesthetic judgment is an essentially self-referential and self-intimating state that involves a primitive feeling of appropriateness or of universal bindingness, something plausibly absent in mere belief with aesthetic content (Ginsborg 2015).

My point is not to defend any particular way of understanding either case, of course. But the idea that these forms of knowledge are distinctive as states of mind, and the further idea that these mental states are intuitively valuable to us, suggests that the strategy advanced here is worth pursuing further.

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Biographical Note

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