

## Remembering what is right

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*Abstract.* According to Pessimism about moral testimony, it is objectionable to form moral beliefs by deferring to another. This paper motivates Pessimism about another source of moral knowledge: propositional memory. Drawing on a discussion of Gilbert Ryle's on forgetting the difference between right and wrong, it argues that Internalism about moral motivation offers a satisfying explanation of Pessimism about memory. A central claim of the paper is that Pessimism about memory (and by extension, testimony) is an issue in moral psychology rather than moral epistemology. That is because it is best explained by appeal to claims about the constitution of moral knowledge as a state of mind, rather than requirements on belief formation. The paper also provides reason to suspect that the focus on testimony is something of a red herring.

**Keywords:** moral motivation; moral knowledge; testimony; memory; Ryle, Gilbert; Aquinas

## 1. Introduction

According to some philosophers, there is something objectionable about forming moral beliefs by testimony. 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). Philosophers like Hills, so-called “Pessimists”, hold that there is a presumption against forming moral beliefs by testimony, doing so is second best or suboptimal. Optimists, by contrast, deny this.<sup>1</sup> If Pessimism is true, that raises a puzzle: why is moral testimony objectionable given that testimony is a viable source of knowledge?<sup>2</sup>

If you’re a Pessimist, you think moral testimony is objectionable in a way that testimony about ordinary empirical matters is not.<sup>3</sup> Compare these cases:

### *Sale Warning*

You are walking into a store when over the loudspeaker you hear a chipper voice tell you that, “All sweaters are 20% off!” Without any reflection or consideration of other evidence, you form the belief that sweaters are 20% off.

### *Fur is Murder*

You are walking into a shop, pushing your way through a crowd, when an abrasive and caustic voice shouts, “Fur is murder! Don’t buy fur!” Without any reflection or consideration of other evidence, you form the belief that it is morally impermissible to buy fur coats.

Nothing objectionable is going on in Sale Warning. Deferring to others about ordinary empirical facts such as the time of year, the date, the weather, and so on is commonplace and unproblematic. Things are intuitively quite different in Fur is Murder, though. Something is fishy about someone who simply takes another at her word about moral matters. To feel the

full force of the intuition, it helps to get clear on just what we're imagining. We are focusing on cases of what Sarah McGrath calls "pure" testimony (2009). This involves accepting another's claim without further reflection; it 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 in which testimony plays some role. Once we understand the restriction, it should be intuitive that there's something objectionable about pure deference.

Optimists do not hold that testimony is always permissible; Pessimists do not hold it never is. Instead, their debate is over the claim, endorsed by the latter and denied by the former, that testimony in moral matters is somehow different in kind from empirical matters. There is something second best or non-optimal about moral deference, and it is something that is not found in cases of non-moral deference. Because of the difference, there is a *defeasible presumption* against testimony as a source of moral beliefs. There are two ways the presumption might be defeated. First, as Robert Hopkins points out, however we understand Pessimism, it is subordinate to the "Ought Implies Can" principle (2007). Deference is permitted in circumstances where one can't but rely on another. Second, it might turn out that, whatever is lacking in cases of deference as a rule or in general is present in some cases. Here deference would be permissible as well.

Hills tries to capture the Pessimistic intuition with the claim that we prefer that you "make up your own mind" when it comes to moral matters; instead of relying on others, you should rely on yourself. But that can't be quite right, since there are a number of different ways of relying on yourself, and not all of them are respectable from the moral point of view. Suppose I buy my children a dog for Christmas but soon tire of it. I wonder: is it permissible to euthanize a dog when you are bored of it? Relying on myself, I reason as follows: I have never heard of people euthanizing a dog because they tire of it. And people surely tire of their

dogs. If it was morally permissible, I bet people would do it frequently, in which case I would have heard about it. So it is probably impermissible to euthanize a dog simply because I am bored with it. This inference to the best explanation seems objectionable in much the same way that relying on others does, yet I surely rely on myself.<sup>4</sup>

Another pervasive and common way of relying on yourself is relying on your propositional memory. Often when you remember something you remember the evidence on the basis of which you originally formed the belief, or at least other considerations accessible to you that support what you remember. But not always. There are also cases of pure propositional memory, when, as if out of the blue, you recall something. Even if you've forgotten your evidence for a proposition, you can know it, and remembering it can provide a reason to maintain your belief. In cases like this you trust yourself to be recalling something you previously came to know. My contention is that cases of pure propositional moral memory, when one recalls a moral proposition without remembering one's original evidence, or any other evidence, are objectionable in exactly the same way that moral testimony is. Again, compare these cases:

#### *Last Minute Gift*

You're walking down the street and stop in front of a store. Looking at a display window with mock gift boxes, it suddenly occurs to you that your friend Lindsay's birthday is next weekend. You don't remember how precisely you came to know this, but you don't have any reason to doubt yourself. You judge that her birthday is coming and set out to buy a present.

#### *Meat is Murder*

You are at the supermarket buying ingredients for dinner. After picking up some produce you wander past the butcher and browse the steaks. As you reach out for a tempting slice, it

occurs to you that it is impermissible to eat meat. You don't remember how precisely you came to believe this, no reasons occur to you, and you don't feel any particular way about eating meat. But you don't have any reason to doubt yourself. You judge that it is wrong to eat meat and set out to find a vegetarian protein.

I think there is an intuitive asymmetry between these cases. Indeed, I think the asymmetry is the *same* asymmetry as that between our earlier cases. Whatever is odd or objectionable about relying on another is odd or objectionable about relying on oneself, when one is merely relying on pure memory. That strongly suggests that the explanation of pessimism will not rely on features idiosyncratic to either case—memory or testimony. For example, a defeasible requirement prohibiting one from relying on testimony to form moral beliefs will not capture the phenomenon, since it won't explain what goes wrong in *Meat is Murder* (or the case involving me and that puppy, for that matter.) That is, some of the candidate explanations of Pessimism about moral testimony from the literature look quite implausible when applied to the case of memory. For example, it's unclear that relying on your memory is in conflict with the demands of authenticity (Mogensen 2017), autonomy (Wolff 1970), or other ideals that involve relying on oneself and not others. If we should seek an explanation that covers both cases, then we need to look elsewhere.

Of course, not everyone will agree that there is a common explanation. After all, one might be a Pessimist about testimony but not memory, or vice versa. My focus in the following will be Pessimism about pure propositional memory. And, as I argue in the next section, this focus isn't a trivial extension of Pessimism about testimony, since memory is not simply an instance of testimony (contra Howell 2014). Thus, the following should be taken, in the first instance, as an explanation of the truth of Pessimism about pure moral memory. But its ambitions are broader than this. I take Pessimism about memory to reveal

that the demand to rely on yourself must come to something quite specific. The goal of this paper is to propose an explanation of what this is. So the paper offers an explanation of Pessimism about moral beliefs based on memory, an explanation I think generalizes to the case of testimony. But the latter point is not my focus here.<sup>5</sup>

The Pessimist about moral memory doesn't demand, absurdly, that one must always deliberate about moral matters afresh. That reveals an important difference between the cases of testimony and memory. For while we might say that in *Fur is Murder* you are being lazy or irresponsible by not considering the matter yourself, the same cannot be said about *Meat is Murder*. We are assuming that you really did consider the ethics of eating meat at some point and came to a conclusion. We might even assume that you did so in much the way that an virtuous person would, that your reasons were sound, and that you achieved moral knowledge by means of your reflections. But, having lost track of (at least) the evidence, you are now in just as benighted a position as the subject who defers. This strongly suggests that our Pessimistic intuitions aren't responding to facts about the *etiology* of moral beliefs. What you do in *Meat is Murder* is intuitively objectionable regardless of how you originally formed the belief that it is impermissible to eat meat. And that strongly suggests that Pessimism shouldn't be captured by appeal to a requirement on belief formation.<sup>6</sup> Instead, if memory is objectionable or second best it may be because of features of one's occurrent memorial beliefs.

Since we are focusing on cases of forgotten evidence, it is natural to suppose that the problem with the case is that your moral belief isn't based on the right kind of reasons, moral reasons (Hopkins 2007). I think there is something right about this proposal, but as we'll see, it faces a serious problem. Instead, my suggestion will be that the problem lies with something else that is lost: the motivations and emotional propensities that accompany moral belief and, arguably, are what make it an instance of genuinely "moral" belief in the first

place. To motivate this view, I look at a discussion of Gilbert Ryle's. In an intriguing, though neglected paper, Ryle claimed that there is something absurd about the idea of forgetting the difference between right and wrong (2009). Though Ryle's topic is not precisely the same as ours, his discussion is informative, for he offers an explanation of Pessimism. On Ryle's view, one cannot lose moral knowledge by simply forgetting because, necessarily, moral knowledge is accompanied by motivation and feeling, (an "inculcated caring" (2009, 401)) and the loss of these cannot be a matter of mere forgetting. Ryle's discussion, and the form of Motivational Internalism he endorses, can make sense of our Pessimistic intuitions about moral memory.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section I discuss memory knowledge. The aim here is to articulate an idea of memory as a source of reasons for belief that remains neutral on many controversial issues in the epistemology of memory. Section three surveys Ryle's puzzle and his solution. That solution depends on a strong form of Motivational Internalism. Section four motivates a weaker version of the view. Section five explains how the weaker form of Internalism explains Pessimism. Section six compares this proposal with one developed by Robert Hopkins. The paper ends by considering objections.

## **2. Propositional Memory as a Source of Reasons for Belief**

The debate between Pessimists and Optimists concerns sources of moral knowledge. The Pessimist about moral memory holds that there is something objectionable about forming or holding a moral belief on the basis of memory.<sup>7</sup> One immediate worry is that some philosophers deny that memory is *ever* a source of knowledge. Michael Dummett writes that, "Memory is not a source, still less a ground, of knowledge: it is the maintenance of knowledge formerly acquired by whatever means" (1994, 262). But our point is consistent with Dummett's view. To say that memory is a source of knowledge, in the sense at issue, is

just to say that a subject can hold or form a belief on the basis of remembering a proposition.<sup>8</sup> A natural way to describe such a case, it seems to me, is that the subject's *reason* for belief is the fact that she recalls the proposition. That's because it is natural to suppose that in such a case a subject can defend her belief by appealing to the fact, reflectively accessible to her, that she remembers that *p*.<sup>9</sup> This shouldn't be read as implying that memory generates justification, though. Preservationists, like Dummett, deny that remembering that *p* can provide a subject with new justification. Rather, if a belief held on the basis of memory is justified at some point in time, it must have received that justification earlier from a non-memorial source. Thus, on the Preservationist view, the subject only possesses a reason for believing what she recalls if she had already come to possess justification for it in the past. By contrast, Generativists hold that remembering that *p* can provide one with new justification for believing that *p* (Lackey 2005). I will remain neutral on these debates, since being Pessimistic about memory doesn't commit one to a side in them.

Some philosophers give a parallel treatment of memory and testimony, going so far as to describe memory as "testimony from one's past self" (Dummett 1994, 252). One might worry that if this is right then there isn't much point dwelling on Pessimism about moral memory since it is simply an instance of the problem with moral testimony. For example, Robert Howell holds that "deference" occurs in both cases:

[D]eference usually involves forming and sustaining a belief based on the fact that someone *else* believes, but that is inessential—one could also form and sustain a belief that *p* based on the fact that either one did believe or will believe that *p*. One could have had brain damage and lose one's moral beliefs, but find out one used to believe that *p*.

However, there are reasons to think that, as a source of reasons for belief, memory should not be conceived of as testimony from one's past.<sup>10</sup> That's because, by the lights of the conception, when one believes that p for the reason that one remembers that p, this would be equivalent to saying: "I believe that p because I *believed* that p" or "I believe that p because I knew that p". That is, one's reason would be the fact that one held a previous belief. But that seems wrong. When you offer a rational explanation of your belief by appeal to memory, you explain it by appeal to a fact about your *present* state of mind, the fact that you remember that p. There might be something to the idea that in remembering one takes oneself at one's word, but one doesn't take one's past self at her word.

Regardless, whatever might be made of the philosophical thesis that memory is akin to testimony, it is doubtful that our pessimistic intuitions about cases like Meat is Murder are wedded to it. It is reasonable to think that those intuitions are theoretically quite innocent (Hopkins 2007). We do not find memory objectionable as a source of reasons for moral belief because of an independent view about the respects in which it is similar to testimony. Pessimism about memory merits our attention.

Four final clarifications. You might think it is odd to focus on cases of forgotten evidence, since these may be rare. If we are interested in memory, shouldn't we focus on its role in cases that are less *recherché*? There are two reasons for the focus. The first is that cases of forgotten evidence are cases in which one relies only on memory, as opposed to other reasons. This parallels the focus on pure deference in the discussion of moral testimony. Less *recherché* cases wouldn't be cases of pure moral memory. The second reason is this. If there is something odd or objectionable about moral memory, then we should expect that it would be rare, just as pure moral deference may be rare. Whatever the frequency of its occurrence, we can be puzzled by our intuitions, and seek to explain them, especially when we grant that one can possess knowledge in these cases.

Second, you might wonder about differences between testimony and memory. That is, you might think that if moral memory Pessimism is worth investigating, that must be because there is something distinctive about it, something that isn't found in testimony. I think there's something to this, but the point is subtle. As mentioned, I think the explanation of Pessimism generalizes to both cases. Whatever is odd or objectionable about merely remembering a moral fact is the same thing that's odd or objectionable about deferring to another. The problem with both is that they are procedures that do not yield genuine *moral knowledge*, in a sense to be spelled out below. I don't doubt that there are important differences between the cases, but I doubt they bear on the truth or explanation of Pessimism. Again, that's because, if you like, the problem with each is what it isn't, not what it is. Still, it is worth focusing on memory, for at least three reasons. First, as suggested above, reflection on Pessimism about memory makes clear why Pessimism in general can't be explained in terms of norms of belief formation. Second, the case of memory reveals that it is not sufficient to emphasize the moral significance of relying on oneself. Third, we can gain some insight into Pessimism by reflecting on the oddity of moral *forgetting*, which I discuss below.

The third clarification concerns the kinds of cases we are considering. There are many different kinds of moral propositions, including abstract moral principles (e.g. the doctrine of double effect, the categorical imperative, the golden rule), general truths about act types (e.g. "eating meat is impermissible", "bullying is cruel"), propositions about virtues (e.g. "chastity is not a virtue", "loyalty is a virtue"), and specific moral claims (e.g. "Roger is courageous", "I ought not eat that piece of meat", "I ought to keep my promise to Jeanne"). Pessimism (about testimony and memory) seems intuitively plausible (at least to me) when it concerns the latter three kinds of cases, and that is because a Pessimist is making a verdict about how a given agent deliberates to action in a particular case. Since it is difficult to know how

precisely very abstract principles figure in our deliberations (if they do at all), I will leave aside cases like suddenly recalling the categorical imperative<sup>11</sup>.

The final clarification concerns two ways in which Pessimism might be understood. I articulated the Pessimistic intuition, vaguely, with the claim that there is something objectionable or odd about basing a moral belief on memory alone or another's testimony. Robert Paul Wolff (1980) argues that testimony is not a means of gaining knowledge of moral matters at all. As Hopkins puts it, on this view, moral knowledge is not available by testimony (2007). Pessimism about memory could be understood this way as well: one cannot possess moral knowledge simply by recalling a moral proposition. A weaker view is that, though knowledge of moral matters is available by testimony or pure memory, there is a presumption against doing so. In line with what is now the dominant view in the literature, I assume the weaker claim. But the stronger thesis will come up in the following, so it is worth flagging early on.

### **3. Ryle's Puzzle**

My proposal is that we can get a clearer view of how to make sense of Pessimism by considering Ryle's discussion of forgetting moral knowledge. Ryle states his puzzle as follows:

*'Don't you know the difference between right and wrong?' 'Well, I did learn it once, but I have forgotten it.'* This is a ridiculous thing to say. But why is it ridiculous? We forget lots of things, including lots of important things, that we used to know. So what is the absurdity in the idea of a person's forgetting the difference between right and wrong?

2009, 394

According to Ryle, the absurdity involved is quite strong. Even though the moral knowledge he is interested in is “common knowledge” (ibid. 402), and though we have plenty of opportunities to exercise it, the oddity does not arise from the fact that it is unlikely that one would forget the difference between right and wrong. Nor can the issue be traced to the idea that virtues are skills, since one’s skills can get rusty: you can forget your Latin, but not the difference between right and wrong.<sup>12</sup> The absurdity is conceptual: “forget” will “not go with” the difference between right and wrong (2009, 395).<sup>13</sup>

Ryle’s topic is not exactly the same as ours, for three reasons. First, Ryle is interested in the general knowledge or ability—“knowing right from wrong”—while our puzzle concerns discrete pieces of moral knowledge. But I think the oddity Ryle observes attaches to the general ability as well as discrete pieces of knowledge. There is something odd about the idea that one might simply *forget* that it is wrong to break a promise as one might forget where one placed the keys. Of course, a change can occur: at one time you knew it and at another you didn’t. But it seems somehow strange to call the change here one of forgetting. Second, obviously, Ryle is interested in the possibility of forgetting whereas we are interested in the appropriateness of remembering. But his discussion bears on ours, since it is reasonable to assume that the oddity of forgetting is the same as the oddity of simply recalling. Third, in the first instance, Ryle is focused on the absurdity of a speech act, asserting that one has forgotten the difference between right and wrong, whereas we are trying to make sense of a state of mind, moral memory knowledge. It may be that the solution to Ryle’s puzzle turns on facts about speakers and speech acts that are irrelevant to our puzzle. But here, too, there is reason to think that Ryle’s puzzle bears on ours since the oddity in the speech act plausibly tracks something about moral belief and knowledge.<sup>14</sup> It may be absurd to assert that one has forgotten the difference between right and wrong, but the bare idea that one could simply forget this is odd, as well. Indeed, as we’ll see, Ryle’s own explanation concerns the nature of

moral knowledge and not the pragmatics of self-ascribing it, so there is some reason to suspect that the phenomenon he is investigating isn't simply a speech act.

Ryle's solution draws on a version of Motivational Internalism about moral knowledge. This is the view that, necessarily, knowing that one morally ought to do A is accompanied by some motivation to do A.<sup>15</sup> To motivate the view, he draws a comparison between moral knowledge and knowledge of the good that is a part of having an educated taste.

There seems to be a sort of incongruity in the idea of a person's knowing the difference between good and bad wine or poetry, while not caring a whit more for the one than for the other; of his appreciating without being appreciative of excellences. When we read, 'We needs must love the highest when we see it', we incline to say, 'Of course. We should not be seeing it if we were not loving it. The "needs must" is a conceptual one. At least in this field, the partitions are down between the Faculties of Cognition, Conation, and Feeling.'

Now whether this inclination is justified or not, it exists just as much in our thinking about the knowledge of right and wrong. Here, too, there seems to be an incongruity in the idea of a person's knowing that something wrong had been done, but still not disapproving of it or being ashamed of it; of his knowing that something would be the wrong thing for him to do, but still not scrupling to do it.

Ibid. 398

Ryle's thought is that because moral knowledge is accompanied by motivation, talk of forgetting is out of place. The ability to tell the difference between right and wrong involves propensities to care about the good, to appreciate it and be moved to pursue it.<sup>16</sup> Though one might lose these propensities and concerns, and thus know the difference at one point in time

and not know it at another, their loss cannot be a matter of forgetting. Aquinas makes the same claim in explaining why practical wisdom cannot be lost through forgetting:

Forgetfulness regards knowledge only, wherefore one can forget art and science, so as to lose them altogether, because they belong to the reason. But practical wisdom consists not in knowledge alone, but also in an act of the appetite ... Hence practical wisdom is not taken away directly by forgetfulness, but rather is corrupted by the passions.

2a2ae.47.16, cited by McGrath 2015, 30, n11

Very roughly, then, Ryle's argument can be put as follows.

INTERNALISM: Necessarily, moral knowledge is accompanied by motivation.

AQUINAS' THESIS: Where there is a necessary connection between knowledge and motivation, that knowledge cannot be lost by forgetting.

NO FORGETTING: Moral knowledge cannot be lost by forgetting.

As mentioned, it is plausible to suppose that Aquinas' thesis applies to remembering as well as forgetting. Thus:

AQUINAS' THESIS (II): Where there is a necessary connection between knowledge and motivation, that knowledge cannot be possessed merely on the basis of remembering.

Internalism would then support the following conclusion:

NO REMEMBERING: Moral knowledge cannot be achieved (or maintained) merely by remembering.

Return to the example Meat is Murder. It simply occurs to you, as if out of the blue, that it is impermissible to eat meat. If No Remembering is true then you fail to possess knowledge. Knowledge that it is impermissible to eat meat is simply unavailable by means of recall. Thus, Ryle's discussion, and the Internalism he invokes, provides an explanation of

Pessimism about memory. However, the version of Pessimism it supports is what I referred as the strong interpretation, on which knowledge of moral facts cannot be based on pure memory. But that is too strong. Pessimism is a *normative* thesis, it claims that subjects do something objectionable, from the moral point of view, in cases like Meat is Murder. It assumes that it is *possible* to behave in that way, and that doing so can be a route to knowledge. But it insists that there is something second best about so behaving.

It seems, then, that Ryle's discussion has ruled out the phenomenon we set out to explain. But that is too quick. Motivational Internalism can be understood two different ways. The stronger thesis, which Ryle seems to accept, leads to the stronger version of Pessimism. But a weaker, and more plausible version explains the truth of the weaker, and more plausible, version of Pessimism. I set this out in the next section.

#### **4. Forgetting**

Internalism holds that there is a necessary connection between moral belief and motivation. Moral beliefs, as such, must be accompanied by motivation. We are assuming the possibility of moral knowledge, so we should assume that moral beliefs are truth apt representations of states of mind-independent states of affairs. Thus, we are interested in Cognitivist Internalism. This view can be understood in two different ways, what I'll call Constitutional and Nonconstitutional Internalism (Bjorklund et al 2013). The Constitutional view denies that moral belief and motivation are, in Hume's terms, "distinct existences." Thus, on this view, moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating cognitive states (McNaughton 1988, Dancy 1993). The Nonconstitutional view allows that moral beliefs and motivations are distinct existences, but holds that our concept of a moral belief picks out a complex state with motivational and cognitive elements. In this spirit, Jon Tresan distinguishes *de re* from *de dicto* interpretations of Internalism.<sup>17</sup> On the *de re* reading, any moral belief or judgment, that is, any belief that

affirms a moral proposition, is necessarily accompanied by motivation.<sup>18</sup> On the *de dicto* reading, 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 would simply not count as a genuine 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*.

Let us mark this distinction provided by the *de dicto* reading as follows. Our concept of moral belief picks out a state that is accompanied by motivation. Let us call such a state genuine moral belief (or knowledge) or moral belief (or knowledge) in the exalted sense. Let us call a belief in a moral proposition without accompanying motivation belief in a moral proposition.

There are reasons to favor the nonconstitutional, *de dicto* reading. First, it avoids many of the counterexamples facing the constitutional view, such as depression and *accidie* (Smith 1994). 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. Third, if Internalism is to explain the absurdity of asserting “I’ve forgotten the difference between right and wrong” then it must be a conceptual truth. Suppose that Ryle is right that knowledge that necessarily involves motivation cannot be lost through forgetting. It follows that, in his example, one reports something impossible. But not all reports of impossible states of affairs are absurd. It would be absurd to assert something conceptually impossible, though. So the very phenomenon Ryle is trying to make sense of supports the nonconstitutional reading.

Assume the nonconstitutional version of Internalism. Necessarily, if a subject holds the moral belief that she ought to do A, then she is motivated to do A, to some degree. If we also assume Aquinas’ claim that the loss of knowledge that depends on appetite cannot be forgetting, then we can explain why it is odd to say that one has forgotten the difference between right and wrong. But we have still left room for the possibility of forgetting moral truths. That’s because the nonconstitutional reading is consistent with the possibility of a belief with a moral content that does not count as a “genuine moral belief”. This would be a motivationally inert belief with moral content. And once we grant the existence of this kind of state then there is no barrier to the possibility of simply forgetting a moral truth, even if we accept Aquinas’ thesis. That is, by embracing the nonconstitutional reading we allow for cases of forgetting and remembering moral truths, but we deny that the state lost or achieved counts as genuine moral belief knowledge. It is a defective kind of state, since it involves grasping a moral truth without, as Ryle puts it, “an inculcated caring” (2009, 401). But it is the kind of state—a garden variety belief state— which “goes with” forgetting and remembering.

This concession still leaves the spirit of Ryle's view intact. For we might reinterpret Ryle as holding that *genuine* moral knowledge, or moral knowledge in an *exalted* sense cannot be lost through forgetting.<sup>19</sup> Thus, on a plausible form of Cognitive Internalism, one supported by Ryle's own discussion, one can possess moral knowledge on the basis of remembering. What matters is that such knowledge is not the kind of state that is picked out by our ordinary concept of moral knowledge and belief.

## 5. Remembering

According to Ryle, moral knowledge will not "go with" talk of remembering and forgetting because our concept of moral knowledge involves a necessary connection to motivation, and the loss of motivation is not a matter of mere forgetting. Likewise, the act of pure propositional remembering is motivationally inert. In pure propositional remembering you recall a piece of information without, thereby, appreciating its significance. If this is what we imagine occurs in cases like Meat is Murder then, this knowledge won't be genuine moral knowledge by the lights of Motivational Internalism.

Pure propositional remembering lacks the motivational and emotional propensities necessary for genuine moral knowledge, what our concept of moral knowledge picks out. If moral knowledge, so understood, is in fact *exalted*, if there is something intrinsically or instrumentally valuable about its possession, then we can explain Pessimism. That's why we are Pessimistic. If your belief that it is impermissible to eat meat is based on memory alone, then it isn't related in the right kind of way to your motivations and emotions. The problem is not that you have forgotten your evidence, but that you don't appreciate the facts in the right way.

But why is this second best? Why is moral knowledge, in the sense picked out by Internalism, superior? There may be more than one reason why we value moral knowledge.

One familiar from discussions of Internalism is that mere knowledge of a moral proposition can only motivate in a defective way. In our example, remembering that it is wrong to eat meat leads you to avoid buying it. It is natural to suppose that the character in this example is 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 one to refrain. But as Michael Smith pointed out, a case like this doesn't merit the label "moral motivation" at all, but is instead the product of rule fetishism (1994). In order for a belief based only on memory to move one to act, it must be combined with a motivational state, one besides those which constitute moral knowledge. Plausibly, acting on such a state is not morally valuable.

One might reject that explanation, of course. I suspect there are others. It seems fair to assume that anyone who accepts Motivational Internalism will also accept that genuine moral knowledge is especially valuable. However precisely we understand the value of genuine moral knowledge (e.g. by appeal to ideals of virtue, or good consequences, or the good will), it seems uncontroversial to assume that knowing and loving the good is better, from the moral point of view, than merely knowing it.

I'll move now to consider two advantages of the view on offer. First, it is well placed to explain Pessimistic *intuitions*. That's because the view draws on a thesis about our *concept* of a moral belief and a particular way of thinking about cases of propositional memory. Thus the view avoids saddling our intuitions with strong theoretical commitments. We don't have especially demanding views of what moral epistemology must be like, rather, we are suspicious of memory because it doesn't seem like a way to arrive at what we recognize as a moral belief. Relatedly, the view can explain intuitions that moral knowledge is not *available* by pure memory (or testimony) (Wolff 1979, see Hopkins 2011 for discussion). There is a sense in which *moral* knowledge cannot be achieved through pure memory, though

knowledge of a moral proposition can. Knowledge is available, but not the exalted kind of knowledge that we associate with the idea of moral knowledge.

A second benefit of the view is that it can explain Optimistic intuitions. What matters here is the thought that not all remembering and forgetting is “mere” remembering and forgetting. When we (Pessimists) think of a case of pure propositional memory, we imagine a situation in which a belief is isolated from one’s other beliefs and motives. Recalling that information doesn’t seem like enough for one to have a genuine moral belief. But not all cases are like that. The jogging of memory can elicit the relevant emotional and motivational reaction. Remembering that eating meat is immoral can bring about the right kinds of moral emotions and lead one to genuine moral knowledge. This is fine by the Pessimist’s lights, since her point is that the emotional states and motives are, if you like, external to the belief forming process. In pure memory you simply take your own word for it, and that is not enough to care.

## **6. Moral Knowledge and Moral Reasons**

The view on offer explains Pessimism by appeal to features of moral knowledge considered as a standing state of mind. A prominent position in the literature explains Pessimism by appeal to the idea that testimony (and presumably memory) violates a non-epistemic norm on the formation of moral beliefs (Hopkins 2011). In this section I’ll raise an objection to this view and argue that our view can capture the insight behind it.

Pure propositional memory is most vividly on display in cases of forgotten evidence. A natural thought is that the problem with memory as a source of moral knowledge is that there is a requirement to form moral beliefs on the right kind of evidence, *moral reasons* (Hopkins 2007). 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 fails to possess genuinely moral grounds lacks knowledge. Rather, she lacks a right to her belief.

I think that Hopkins' proposal, like others which appeal to "grasping" the right kind of reasons is on to something (McGrath 2009). However, I don't think it can be right as it stands. 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. One might say that the problem in *Meat is Murder* is that you can't offer an explanation of why it is wrong to eat meat. Your 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 stringent a demand to place on our moral beliefs. After all, many of our beliefs are based on intuitions or feelings (Mogensen 2017). One has a sense that it is wrong to do something, 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 memory. And once we ditch the view that it requires articulating reasons, it's 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 memory. Self-trust is a kind of indirect sensitivity to moral reasons (as is trust in others). The suspicion is that the idea of a moral reason will have to be articulated ostensibly. It's the kind of thing you grasp in moral perception, moral reasoning, moral emotions, but not memory (or testimony). And the worry is that to say this isn't to make much of an advance over our original statement of Pessimism.

I think that the Requirement goes wrong in attempting to formulate a norm for forming moral beliefs, and hence a reason on the basis of which they must be formed. But

there is an insight behind it, which is this: the moral knowledge we value involves a sensitivity to certain kinds of considerations. But we can capture this with the idea that the *state* of moral knowledge involves such a sensitivity while leaving it open how precisely that state is arrived at. Instead, we need to identify the right kind of sensitivity to moral reasons. It is highly plausible that this is exactly what Internalism can do. For that view will hold that genuine moral belief involves and depends on certain kinds of emotional and conative states. How one understands this depends on how one spells out Internalism. To do this one must identify the kinds of emotional or motivational states that are associated with moral beliefs and explain how they are related to those beliefs. That is obviously a task for a separate paper.<sup>20</sup>

## **7. Objections**

I have motivated Pessimism about pure moral memory. I suggested that our Pessimistic intuitions are closely related to Ryle's thought that there is something absurd or odd about forgetting the difference between right and wrong. While Ryle is mistaken in thinking that one cannot forget or remember moral knowledge, he is right that Motivational Internalism can explain the phenomenon. I'll end in this section by considering objections.

As noted, I am inclined to think that this explanation applies to the case of testimony as well (Doyle 2019). There is a presumption against simply deferring to another because there is a presumption that forming beliefs by deferring can't lead one to moral knowledge as described by Internalism. I won't argue for that here. Instead, I'll consider the objection that memory and testimony are importantly different and that we should be Pessimistic about testimony but not memory. I grant that there is an intuitive difference between the cases, but this difference is either irrelevant to Pessimism or compatible with the explanation I have offered.

You might think the difference between testimony and memory is epistemic. For example, you might think that memory generates justification but testimony doesn't. Or you might think that there is something good, from the epistemic point of view, about relying on oneself, even in cases of forgotten evidence, that is absent in cases of pure deference. I am skeptical of both views, but epistemic differences like these are irrelevant. Whatever good standing memory has that testimony lacks it does not change the intuitions we have about cases like Meat is Murder. I have granted that we possess knowledge by pure memory and have assumed that the problem with memory is not narrowly epistemic. So the fact that memorial knowledge has a better standing shouldn't lead one to Optimism.

One important difference between memory and testimony is that we can suppose that in a case of forgotten evidence the subject did at one point possess the relevant motivations. She did possess genuine moral knowledge. Moral deference cases aren't like that. So treating the cases differently might be explained by the suspicion that the motivations aren't *really* lost, and that the dissociation is temporary, that the motivation is masked rather than lost. For example, we might imagine the subject in Meat is Murder as depressed. Her circumstances have interfered with the emotional propensities that are necessary for genuine moral knowledge. Because of this, we are reluctant to issue the negative judgment that comes naturally in cases of deference. Still, if we keep in mind a case where the relevant motivations or emotions are genuinely lost while the belief is retained, where the moral thought comes out of the blue, then, I submit, we will be Pessimistic.

It is, of course possible that there are other morally significant differences between the cases. It is plausible to suppose that the morality of self-trust is different than trust in others, especially once we recognize that self-trust isn't simply an instance of trust in another. These differences are worth investigating further. My claim here is only that they do not undermine Pessimism about pure memory as a source of moral belief.

Another objection starts at the beginning: our supposed Pessimistic intuitions. One might grant that there is something fishy about how one behaves in Meat is Murder, but worry that this doesn't translate to other cases of pure propositional remembering about moral matters. Consider this example:

*Bad Apple*

You are informed that company X mistreats their employees and are heavy polluters. You form the belief that they have a bad moral reputation. Later, you have forgotten all of your reasons for this belief. You are at the store, considering buying some expensive piece of equipment manufactured by company X. All of a sudden, as if out of the blue, you recall that company X has a bad moral reputation. You decide not to buy the equipment.

One might insist that you do nothing wrong in Bad Apple, and that this imputes the truth of Pessimism.<sup>21</sup>

The first thing to point out is that the Pessimist can allow that you do nothing wrong in Bad Apple. That is, she can allow that you should rely on your memory and refrain from buying the item. The Pessimist claims that there is a defeasible presumption against simply relying on your memory, leaving open how often that presumption is, in fact, defeated. It is plausible to suppose that it would be defeated in this case, given that one cannot recall one's reasons and possessing the item isn't especially important (since, presumably, there is no harm in *not* buying the item.)

Presumably, though, the objection makes a stronger point: with this case, there is not even a whiff of the fishiness that motivated Pessimism in the first place. There is no presumption against relying on memory.

It matters a great deal how we understand the role of memory in this case, specifically which proposition the subject retrieves from memory and how exactly we are to imagine her deliberation proceeding. In *Bad Apple*, it seems to me, one recalls the proposition “company X has a bad moral reputation.” But one acts on the proposition, “I ought not support companies with bad moral reputations.” It seems fair to suppose that this latter thought is an instance of genuine moral knowledge, manifesting an appropriate aversion to morally suspicious companies. So the Pessimist can grant that nothing is amiss in *Bad Apple* because she can deny that it is a case of pure moral remembering. Contrast this with a case in which, noticing that the item is manufactured by company X one thinks, “I ought not buy an item from company X.” Acting on this thought seems to me second-best from the moral point of view, and an instance of the same oddity as *Meat is Murder*. Perhaps, in this case, all things considered, you should rely on memory alone. But doing so is second-best.

The primary goals of this paper have been to motivate Pessimism about moral beliefs based on propositional memory alone and to provide an explanation of its truth. But there are broader takeaways. It is plausible to suppose that Pessimistic intuitions about memory and testimony should be given the same explanation, that the two cases are really instances of a more general phenomenon. If that is right, then we won’t explain either case by focusing on “relying on oneself”, as opposed to others, or the etiology of our moral beliefs. The view defended here provides an alternative. Pessimism is an issue in moral psychology, concerning the constitution of moral knowledge as a mental state, and not moral epistemology narrowly conceived.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The labels “Optimist” and “Pessimist” come from Hopkins 2007. Pessimists include Wolff 1970, Nickel 2001, Hopkins 2007, Hills 2009, 2013, and Howell 2014. Optimists include Jones 1999 and Sliwa 2012. Groll and Decker 2012 and Mogensen 2017 offer qualified defences of Pessimism.

<sup>2</sup> Some Pessimists deny that moral knowledge is available by testimony (Wolff 1970). See Hopkins 2007 and 2011 for arguments against that position.

<sup>3</sup> Pessimists can grant that deference about some nonmoral matters, such as aesthetics, is also objectionable, of course. The point is just that moral testimony is problematic in a way that ordinary testimony is not.

<sup>4</sup> And it isn't an instance of relying on others. I rely on a fact about others in my reasoning, not their word. I would be relying on others if I took the bumper sticker (popular in the UK) “A dog is for life, not just for Christmas” at face value.

<sup>5</sup> I focus on the case of moral testimony in Doyle 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Contra Hopkins 2007. I discuss his view later in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “memory” will refer to propositional or declarative memory, rather than imagistic or procedural memory. See Michaelian and Sutton 2017 for a helpful overview of the issues.

<sup>8</sup> The standard view in the literature is that propositional memory entails knowledge (Williamson 2000). If that's right, then it might not be possible to form a belief on the basis of remembering. Even so, we can ask how a subject is justified in *retaining* a held belief, and it seems fair to appeal to memory here.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the factive attitude that she remembers isn't reflectively accessible. The point stands if we think that *seeming to remember* or something similar serves as one's reason.

<sup>10</sup> Howell might still be right that believing that P upon learning that I used to believe it is analogous to deference. But memory isn't like that. For discussion see Barnett 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

<sup>12</sup> One lesson we are to draw from this, and surely an important one for Ryle, is that we cannot identify moral knowledge with either knowing how or knowing that. It is a third species of knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> The absurdity is quite strong, but not magical. He writes: “... the assertion that it is absurd to say that a person might forget the difference between right and wrong could be misconstrued as the ascription to our knowledge of right and wrong of an inspiring kind of indelibility, perhaps a Heaven-hinting innateness or a trailing cloud of glory. No such edifying moral can be looked for.” (2009, 395). Apparently, for Ryle, the moral law is not written in the hearts of all.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny that there may be a puzzle that arises only for the speech act. See McGrath 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ryle discusses knowledge, while most contemporary metaethicists conceive of Internalism as a claim about moral judgment (Shafer-Landau 2003). It is not clear whether Ryle thinks that moral judgments or beliefs that do not express knowledge are accompanied by motivation as well. For the sake of simplicity, I will present Internalism as a thesis about

*moral belief*. But this could be modified without loss to whichever version of the view one favors.

<sup>16</sup> Ryle intentionally leaves the form of motivation open writing, “[t]his *caring* is not a special feeling; it covers a variety of feelings, like those that go with being shocked, ashamed, indignant, admiring, emulous, disgusted, and enthusiastic” (2009, 400).

<sup>17</sup> Tresan 2006, see also Radcliffe 2006. Unlike Tresan, I assume that Internalism is a thesis about individuals and not groups.

<sup>18</sup> It’s not easy to determine just what counts as a moral proposition. I’ll have to rely on the intuitive idea here.

<sup>19</sup> It seems clear that Ryle accepts the constitutional reading. At one point he makes the claim, familiar from Hare 1952, that a moral belief unaccompanied by motivation could only involve the moral “ought” in an inverted comma sense. The subject recognizes that it is wrong but only “what other people call ‘wrong’” (2009, 398). What the nonconstitutional reading makes room for comes to more than this, though. It makes room for a belief with moral content that lacks motivation without inverted commas, the kind of moral beliefs held, arguably, by depressed people. It is, I think, a considerable strength of that reading that it isn’t forced into Hare’s interpretation of such cases. That is, we needn’t suppose that subjects who lack the relevant motivations (such as depressed people or you in *Meat is Murder*) are insincere or exhibit some semantic failure.

<sup>20</sup> See Radcliffe 2006 for some discussion from a Humean perspective.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this example and worry.

## Notes on Contributor

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