

THESIS

MORAL EXPERTISE, TESTIMONY, AND DEFERRAL

Submitted by

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Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2026

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ABSTRACT

MORAL EXPERTISE, TESTIMONY, AND DEFERRAL

In everyday life we often seek out experts in various fields in order to meet our numerous needs and wants. Whether they are doctors, mechanics, or electricians, we defer to their judgement regarding the wellbeing of our bodies, our cars, and our homes. Given the caveat that these individuals are knowledgeable, reliable, and honest, it is considered uncontroversial, and in most cases rational, to do so without questioning their judgement. Deferring to experts in these cases can save us time and toil insofar as we can offload the manual and epistemic labor involved in learning these skills for ourselves. A problem that has arisen in the metaethics literature is whether we should similarly defer regarding morality. Should one offload the epistemic labor involved in deliberating about morality oneself by believing and acting upon the moral claims of a moral expert?

Intuitions are divided as to which side, pro or con, we should fall under. The claim is that if deferral to moral expertise does not differ in any epistemic or morally relevant way from deferral to non-moral expertise, then doing so is legitimate. If we are to propose that one should not do so in the case of morality, while simultaneously holding that it is perfectly fine to do so in the non-moral realm then we must provide a reason as to why this is the case. This has been dubbed the asymmetry problem. In the moral expertise literature, those who think an asymmetry exists such that we have reason *not* to defer to moral experts are known as pessimists. The opposingly connoted optimists are those who think there is either no reason not to defer or positive reasons for doing so. Arguments from both sides further diverge regarding their

justifications into either epistemic or moral arguments. The former concerns whether there lies an obstacle in meeting the conditions necessary for moral testimony to be a source of knowledge, while the latter concerns whether there is a moral norm or principle, beyond the epistemic, which makes it unacceptable to exploit moral expertise as a resource.

In this thesis I will be providing a moral pessimistic argument for why we may have reason, in some cases, to *not* defer to moral expertise. I take the asymmetry to lie in a prescription of moral agency that in order to be good moral agents we are required to learn how to deliberate on our own and in deferring we are offloading an opportunity to do so. In deferring one is not provided any reason as to why an action is correct or incorrect or a circumstance is good or bad. Even if one is provided with a reason, in deferring one fails to grasp the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true. This is to say that in deferring one fails to gain moral understanding. Moral understanding is not only helpful in developing the epistemic abilities necessary for good moral agency, but is instrumentally valuable for reliably acting correctly in the future.

In chapter one I consider the metaethics of moral expertise. Particularly the things that must be metaphysically and epistemically true of morality for moral expertise to conceptually exist at any level. Upon accepting these, I define what I take moral expertise to consist in. Following this I consider some epistemic arguments and provide why I have opted for moral arguments instead.

Chapter two will consist of considering and attempting to refute moral arguments apart from my own, particularly a prevalent optimistic argument from David Enoch in his “A Defence of Moral Deference” (2014). I will then explicate and define what moral understanding is and why it is a reason against deference.

The final chapter will be composed of rebuttals to critiques against my view. One of the stronger critiques I will be replying to is that there may be cases where one could defer and deliberate after the fact in order to gain the advantages of both deferral and moral understanding. I conclude by proposing ways in which moral experts and their expertise remain useful for the moral deliberation of others despite the relegated status my view places them in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Tropman, for without her meticulous comments and guidance this thesis would not be nearly as good as it is. I would also like to thank my other readers, Dr. Eirik Harris and Dr. Matthew Hickey for their additional comments. The Colorado State Philosophy Department for the opportunity to pursue this degree. Emma Cleveringa, the assistant to the chair, for all the help navigating the program and being someone I felt I could confide in. My father, Aaron Ames, for the financial support he has given me while I have been living on a philosopher's salary. My sister, Zoe Ames, I have seen you grow and mature so much in the past few years, and you were there for me at my lowest. My grandmother, Sonya Ames, who has supported me even though she does not understand exactly what philosophy entails. My best friend of over a decade, Josh Miner. Lastly my colleague, roommate, and friend Michael Wong, who is the only person who really saw just how difficult this project really was and the toll it took on me.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Mandi Robinson, thank you for never giving up on me even when I give up on myself.

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Chapter 1: The Metaethics and Epistemology of Moral Expertise

1.1. Expertise in Morality: An Introduction

In everyday life we often seek out experts in various fields for our various needs, in the case that we lack some skill or knowledge that they possess. Whether they are doctors, mechanics, or electricians, we defer to their judgements regarding the well-being of our bodies, our cars, and our homes. We defer to their judgment to achieve whatever end we have in mind whether that be to achieve health, fix our catalytic converter, or build our home. We even do so for what may be considered less concrete and more abstract forms of expertise, such as areas of reasoning ability and even aesthetics. We may ask experts to defend us in court and pick apart the reasoning of prosecutors, hire someone to decorate our home, or act as art museum curators. There is deferral in something even as simple as looking at movie and book reviews to determine what we should watch or read for entertainment.

It is reasonably uncontroversial, and in most cases rational, to do so without questioning said judgment, given the caveat that they are knowledgeable, reliable, and not deceitful. The particular descriptive phenomenon in question is arguably and in principle equally accessible to the expert and the layperson in terms of perception: we both can see my body, my car, art pieces, etc, but we take it that these experts know something that we do not. They possess some know-how or factually relevant propositional knowledge that allows them to do something that we ourselves could not. I can take a look at my engine, and I can see that it is not working properly just as the mechanic could, but I cannot determine why it is going wrong nor how to fix it.

So, what reason could there possibly be, irrelevant of the criteria mentioned above regarding the expert not being knowledgeable, reliable, and truthful, for not deferring to experts

in these circumstances? We cannot be a true jack of all trades and expect ourselves to do just as good of a job as others if we lack said knowledge. Frankly, it would be crazy for me to think it a good idea to fix my car myself, start a pop culture podcast, or even defend myself in court if I did not myself have possession of the knowledge required to do these things well, especially since I am not an expert in any of them! Deferring to an expert in these cases can save us time and toil due to the fact that we ourselves do not have to learn what they already know, and they are more likely to do it well than we are. Irrespective of some further reason or justification for not deferring to their expertise, the *prima facie* response would be to do so.

The question I am concerned with in this thesis is whether this may also be the case with morality? If there are moral experts, would it be equally uncontroversial to offload our moral deliberation and decisions to them? Morality would at first glance be the exact same as expertise in any of these other domains in that while we have equal access to the moral phenomenon as the experts do, they have some moral knowledge that we lack such that it would be beneficial for us to defer in that it may also save us time and toil. The experts may have an understanding as to why something is morally right or wrong or how to bring about morally good circumstances, although we are both privy to the morally relevant phenomena. The fact that they are more likely to be right than we are about moral matters would make deferral to them serve the very end of morality which would be to act in a morally correct manner. This is distinct from reason to defer irrespective of morality, particularly pragmatic or epistemic claims for why we should defer to moral experts. These would be claims of what we should do for reasons regarding what we would constitute as successful actions for whatever end we have in mind and claims of what will be most beneficial for our knowledge, beliefs, and justification. I will accept that acting on pragmatic or epistemic reasons can be acceptable if these reasons are also moral reasons for

doing so. An example of a pragmatic claim would be that we should defer to experts because it saves us time, is convenient or follows from our self-interest. An epistemic claim, like we will see in section 1.6, could be that deferring maintains rationality and logical consistency. These need not be moral claims as deferring to a moral expert may be more convenient for us or may be a more rational act, but this does not mean that it is the proper moral act. If these claims were also proposed as reasons for satisfying some moral norms like reducing harm or respecting individuals, then they would also constitute moral claims, not just pragmatic or epistemic. I will assume that the agent in our hypothetical dilemma does have a personal interest in doing the right thing and that this personal interest can help combat against pragmatic reasons to defer that would be less than ideal for acting rightly. So, the question is whether moral expertise is of the same nature as non-moral expertise such that there is no problem morally with deferring to moral experts or whether there is some difference between the two such that we have reasons not to defer?

This is known as the asymmetry problem, which I will be outlining and explaining in section 1.3. The debate is between pessimists, those who think we *should not* defer to moral experts, and optimists, those who think we should defer. This question, as well as the introduction that came before it, may have intuitively brought forth a question amongst my readers as to whether moral expertise exists to begin with. Thus, we must consider the assumptions one must make about morality itself that would be required for moral experts to be plausible.

The main thrust of this project is to argue for a weak pessimist view, that there are generally good moral reasons that we have to not defer to moral experts and deliberate about morality for ourselves, in most cases, for the instrumental value of developing moral

understanding and the epistemic abilities that come with it. The moral expertise literature has traditionally split the arguments of both pessimists and optimists into epistemic arguments and moral arguments, respectively. In this thesis, I will be proposing a moral argument for the epistemic standards of morality. To do so, I will be both arguing against one of the most prominent arguments that we should defer to moral experts, coming from David Enoch (2014), and defending the work of Allison Hills on moral understanding and its value (Hills, 2009; Hills, 2016). I will be making a move like one made by William Clifford (1877) in his “The Ethics of Belief,” by proposing a moral claim about an epistemic norm, that certain epistemic abilities are essential to being a good moral agent. At the basest level the epistemology of ethics is going to involve making distinctions between good and bad, determining reasons and justification behind our actions, determining the best action for bringing about the good, and these are all the kinds of things a moral agent should foster. I will be arguing that deferral offloads and disincentivizes the development of moral understanding and the abilities that come with it. So, what I am claiming is that one does have a moral obligation to gain the epistemic abilities to become a good moral agent and if not deferring is a good way to do so, and we already have the ability to develop moral understanding, then generally we should not defer. I am not arguing for a strong pessimist view that we should never defer. We should defer if we lack the ability to develop moral understanding, i.e. if we are not moral agents.

Secondly, I am not arguing for pessimism on the grounds that a particular moral theory is true and instead attempting to show that not deferring has instrumental value for most, if not all moral theories. However, I will be adopting some Kantian claims about the nature of morality. Namely, that morality is of a categorical nature and that moral understanding is of an egalitarian nature. The categorical nature of morality is to say that the dictates of morality apply to all moral

agents, and one cannot offload one's moral obligations from desire or preference and the truth regarding whether something is right or wrong is due to something other than the fact one thinks it to be. As a categorical end, bringing about the good is the ultimate end of practical reason, and hypothetical ends are only important insofar as we personally care about them. The egalitarian claim is that if one is a moral agent, one has the ability to develop moral understanding, not that one starts with it. This claim is not, however, that this ability is expressed equally among people. I will have much more to say about these introductory concepts later.

This project will be divided into three chapters: the first acting as a literature review as well as the setup of the debate, the second will consist of the refutation of an opposing argument and the proposal of my own, and the final chapter will consider rebuttals to my own position and concluding remarks about the value of moral experts and expertise. In this chapter, particularly section 1.2, I will be proposing and explaining that morality is of a nature such that we might be inclined to think moral expertise exists and deferral to experts to regularly occur. Section 1.3 consists of answering some basic questions I have found are often proposed to me upon introduction to the topic. In 1.4 I will be laying out and engaging with the literature and debate on deferral that follows upon accepting moral expertise to exist. Here I will be further explaining the asymmetry problem. This will require that I also define moral expertise and narrow in on the area of the debate I will be engaging with. I will be mirroring the literature by showing the distinction in the debate between epistemic arguments and moral arguments. In 1.5 I explain why I have opted for a moral argument as opposed to an epistemic one. I will be focusing strictly on epistemic arguments in 1.6. Section 1.7 will serve as a conclusion to Chapter 1 as well as an introduction to Chapter two.

1.2. Metaethics and the Hypothetical Plausibility of Moral Experts and Moral Expertise

The question remains as to whether morality can be of the nature that moral experts exist. I want to consider what would be required, whether metaphysically or epistemically, were we to think moral experts could hypothetically exist at all, in any capacity, irrespective of a definitive conception of moral expertise. Regardless of our necessary and sufficient conditions for defining moral expertise, certain things regarding epistemology and morality would need to be true for moral expertise to exist in any capacity. As a result, we would need to postulate these prior metaethical stances before we can even engage in talking about moral expertise. If we were to think certain metaethical views regarding morality are true, it would follow that we think moral expertise could exist in some form. So, I will need to show what needs to be the case regarding morality for moral expertise to hypothetically exist.

Some such as Gilbert Ryle have proposed skeptical arguments against the possibility of moral expertise by proposing that morality is either of the nature that it is not a form of knowledge, is simply emotive, and does not consist in better or worse claims (Ryle, 1957). Ryle proposes that upon learning something is morally wrong, one never forgets that it is right or wrong, thus making it not a matter of knowledge. “Ryle *famously* noted that there were no moral experts, because there is nothing for them to be experts *about*...this (Ryle’s argument) indicated that morality is not a matter of knowing, but of feeling. There is nothing cognitive about it...It is not possible for one to know more since *no one* knows anything at all with respect to morality” (Driver, 2013, p. 281). A view such as this would be an anti-realist view of moral expertise as it proposes that they do not exist due to the acceptance of a certain metaethical view.

Ryle’s view above falls within the theory of non-cognitivism about morality. Non-cognitivism as a theory states that moral utterances do not have a truth value, our discourse around morality is not referring to a property in the world and that there are no moral facts.

There essentially are no moral claims on this view as utterances that might appear propositional in nature, or getting at moral concepts such as ‘X is right, good, moral, etc,’ are expressions of an emotional state. When we say ‘X is right’ we are simply expressing our emotional state as the statement is really expressing an emotive response of ‘boo’ or ‘yay’ in relation to X rather than stating that X has moral propositional content. Cognitivism is the opposite of this in that it claims moral propositions to have a truth value and are not merely expressive of an emotional state, but are an expression of moral beliefs, so expressive of moral cognitive content. Driver cites Eric Wiland to debunk Ryle’s arguments, “while it is true that it would be very odd indeed for someone to forget the difference between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ it would also be odd to forget the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’ and yet that surely does not show that the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’ is one of *feeling*” (Driver, 2013, p. 281). This may give us a reason to think Ryle’s non-cognitivist argument fails.

I do not have the space to explicate and defend a theory of cognitivism but will be moving forward under the assumption that many people implicitly start as cognitivists and only change their mind upon being provided reasons not to be. It will be required that one assent to cognitivism, that moral statements have truth value, to follow my arguments¹. If moral claims do not consist of moral beliefs, propositional knowledge, or are not capable of having a truth value, moral experts would not exist as their utterances would not be expressing any knowledge or facts of the matter regarding morality because under this view there is not any knowledge or facts of the matter regarding morality. The disjunct between cognitivism and non-cognitivism is not just

¹ I am aware that there are some versions of non-cognitivism, such as Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realism, which attempts to bridge the gap between non-cognitivism and cognitivism, by endorsing “an anti-realist metaphysical stance but who seeks, through philosophical maneuvering, to earn the right for moral discourse to enjoy all the trappings of realist talk” (Blackburn, 1993; Joyce, 2022). It is not my place here to state whether his view is correct or works. I would be hesitant to accept a view that is anti-realist about morality, but if it does in fact succeed it is possible it could be a metaethical view compatible with my arguments.

what moral claims are referring to propositionally, but what exactly we are doing in regard to the practice of morality. We can see a well-articulated litany of cognitivist claims in the following quote:

Moral judgements are typically expressed in language employing the declarative mood; we engage in moral argument and deliberation; we regard people as capable both of making moral mistakes and of correcting their moral views; we often feel constrained by what we take to be moral requirements that are in some sense imposed from without and independent of us. These phenomena are held to demonstrate the realist or cognitivist character of common sense morality (Brink, 1989, p. 24).

When we declare something such as ‘slavery is wrong,’ we seem to be ascribing a property to slavery of wrongness in a similar way that we would declare other sentences such as ‘the sky is blue.’ We think sentences such as this have a fact of the matter regarding their truth such that the statement itself could be incorrect. Statements of this form seem to be descriptive claims about the way the world is. When individuals make claims of this sort, we feel the need to correct them if they are wrong and if the statements are true, they often imply some sort of reaction from us regarding their veridicality. We may be inclined to think that this constitutes what we are doing when engaging in moral discourse, but as we have seen, there are those who think this is not the case.

The non-cognitivist does not think that this is what the practice of morality amounts to. This usually brings forward a claim by the cognitivist that under non-cognitivism disagreement is not possible as moral claims are constituted as a form of expression rather than having propositional content. I would not be trying to change other minds, claim they are wrong, provide reasons for thinking so, or make any claim relative to others. What reason do I have to

think that people ought to think and feel in the same way that I do, if there is no fact of the matter regarding value claims, and especially if I have no other justification for thinking so other than it does not make me feel good? This might give us reason to be implicit cognitivists unless shown otherwise, but does this commit us to think at least some moral claims are in fact true?

Thus, it is also necessary that we consider other theorists that would also deny the possibility of moral expertise. Namely, those who are cognitivists, in that they think moral propositions have a truth value, but who also believe all moral propositions have the truth value of false. Essentially those that think moral discourse is meaningful in some sense, but that we are mistaken as to what follows metaphysically regarding morality. This idea is known as error theory (Mackie, 1977). Error Theorists, also known as moral nihilists, believe we are misconstrued in our belief that there are moral facts or moral obligations in the world. Success theory would claim the opposite, that we are not mistaken about the nature of our moral discourse such that our moral claims get at something, however minimal in the world, making it the case that some of our moral claims are, in fact, true. For moral experts to exist, it must be the case that there are moral facts and moral obligations and that some statements regarding them can be true.

If we do think morality consists in beliefs and judgements that are capable of truth and falsity, this may bring forth the question as to whether one must be a moral realist to follow my arguments. One need not be a moral realist to think moral experts hypothetically and conceptually exist on my view. By moral realist I mean the definition given by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord: 1) moral statements are true or false 2) some moral statements are true where 3) the truth conditions of the moral statement do not depend on any agents actual or hypothetical beliefs, attitudes, or preferences (Sayre-McCord, 1986, p. 5). Considering the two previous

paragraphs regarding cognitivism and success theory we would need to assent to 1) and 2), but one does not have to assent to 3) to think moral experts to hypothetically exist. There being some standard to which we can index moral claims as being better or worse is all that is required. This would allow moral experts to exist even if one were to be a constructivist, subjectivist, or intersubjectivist. I will be taking this group of theories to differ from moral realism in the fact that they do not satisfy the third proposition of Sayre-McCord's definition as the truth value of moral claims under these theories is dependent, rather than independent of individuals or groups beliefs, attitudes, or preferences yet they still index the value claims to some standard.

If one thinks moral discourse to be of the nature that moral claims, judgements, and actions can be better or worse comparatively then it follows that we would think there to be individuals who do a better job at the practice of morality, whatever we think that to constitute. Moral nihilists, on the other hand, purport that morality does not exist metaphysically in any sense and that morality does not show up in the world either as a non-natural or supernatural metaphysical object nor does it supervene upon natural physical properties. It is clear that if one is a nihilist about morality, one does not believe moral experts exist as there is nothing to be an expert about. So, one can fall anywhere within an area between nihilism and realism regarding morality and believe moral experts can exist. We might think lots of things to be of the nature such that they are not robustly real in a metaphysical sense, but still remain real as a social construct. This quote helps show why some might think morality to be of this nature, but still maintain that it has some standard:

Evaluations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards. The classing of wool, the grading of apples, the awarding of prizes at sheepdog trials, flower shows, skating and diving championships, and even the marking of

examination papers are carried out in relation to standards of quality or merit which are peculiar to each particular subject-matter or type of contest, which may be explicitly laid down but which, even if they are nowhere explicitly stated, are fairly well understood and agreed by those who are recognized as judges or experts in each particular field...comparative judgements in particular will be capable of truth and falsehood (Mackie, 1977, p. 26).

If we think morality to be of this comparative nature, even at the level of a social construct, we will think it morality capable of having standards regarding better and worse moral claims of which are capable of truth and falsehood relative to those standards.

Something to also consider about morality as a normative discipline concerning value is how it may relate analogically to the other major normative discipline, namely aesthetics. It is much easier to show the disanalogy between moral and non-moral expertise as being between normative and descriptive claims. However, there may be a worry that if we place aesthetic experts in an analogy to moral experts and we are to take aesthetics to be aimed at something like personal taste then we might think morality is also a matter of taste. The first thing we might notice about an argument like this is that it has an implicit premise that makes a decent leap in logic: if one normative discipline ultimately reduces to personal preference, a claim that is already contested within the aesthetics discipline, then other normative disciplines also reduce to personal preference. This shows that how well an argument from analogy would work would depend upon how much we take aesthetics to be distinctive from morality. One way that we could combat this analogy is to look at what is called 'normative force' regarding both aesthetics and morality and how it differs between them. Normative force regards the strength with which we have reasons to do something. To put this more simply, do we ultimately have any reason to

do what we might have aesthetic reasons to do? The questions around normativity involve why ‘should,’ ‘ought,’ ‘must,’ ‘need’ we do something and what reasons have we for doing them. If an aesthetics expert, such as an interior designer were to decorate our homes, but we find their choices to be unenjoyable to us then we might not have reason to defer to them. We would really be looking for a so called ‘aesthetic expert’ that comports with our tastes and there might be a worry that we are doing something similar in looking for moral experts. We might think morality is distinctly different from aesthetics because its normative force does not reduce to our personal preferences because personal preferences are not the kind of thing that makes something moral.

It is also necessary that I touch here on epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, that would be required one hold to think moral experts to hypothetically exist and in such a way that deferral would be hypothetically worth considering. It follows from the beliefs expressed in the previous paragraphs regarding morality existing in some respect, such that there are true and false moral propositions that can be relative to some standard, that morality is also of the nature that it can be known. Were it the case that morality was in fact real, but everyone, for some epistemological or metaphysical reason, did not have access to these facts then no moral experts would exist because nobody would be able to know more than anyone else, such that we would have reason to defer to them, as nobody would know *anything* about morality. It will also follow from this that moral knowledge must be the kind of thing that some individuals know more about than other individuals and that the alternative, everyone knows morality equally well, cannot be true were we to think moral expertise and reasons to defer to them to conceptually exist.

Secondly, morality must be of the nature that not *all* moral facts and propositions are prima facie obvious, and the extent of moral disagreement seems to support this as the case. If they were obvious then deferral would be superfluous as you would be inquiring about

something you either already know or could easily find out for yourself. Deferral would also be of the nature that we think moral knowledge to be something that can be transferred to others through testimony, or it would also make no sense to inquire about it. If I cannot gain knowledge from others, then I cannot gain moral knowledge from others. It will not be necessary to presuppose a specific epistemological theory here, as any theory that can construe morality as being knowable and transferable as knowledge can think about moral expertise and deferral hypothetically. David Brink puts this rather succinctly, “where there is knowledge, it is usually distributed unequally...if there are moral facts, there had better be moral knowledge too. If there is moral knowledge, there should be moral experts” (Brink, 1989, p. 95).

To conclude, the moral beliefs that would be required to think moral experts hypothetically exist, regardless of the criteria to dub them as such, would be 1) that there are moral truths regarding morality such that it exists and we can be right or wrong about it, 2) that there are individuals who get things right or wrong and act better and worse than others, and 3) that morality can be known and there are individuals that know more than others regarding morality. This requires that one be a cognitivist, a success theorist, and at least believe moral claims to have comparative value, regarding one’s metaethics, to think moral experts plausible and which I will be assuming moving forward. My theory need not take a definitive stance as to the truth of moral realism. My theory does, however, require one to take some metaethical stance regarding the truth of morality that at least construes it as being indexed to some standard. The nihilist, non-cognitivist, and error theorist need not read any further as we fundamentally disagree about the nature of morality such that moral expertise cannot exist hypothetically under their views. In this next section, I will be clarifying what sort of questions about moral experts I will be answering in this piece. It is to this that we turn.

1.3. Questions Regarding Moral Expertise

Now that we might think that moral expertise hypothetically exists, we should look towards the next questions in the dialectic that must be answered to express my argument: what constitutes a moral expert? Depending on what criteria we take to constitute a moral expert will change who we take moral experts to be. I will be answering this question regarding the constitution of moral experts and who they are, to be what I am calling a deflationary or reductionist view. By this I mean that deferral to an expert does not require we take a robust view of expertise in the same way we might think regarding the constitution of non-moral experts. We may be inclined to think of one as a non-moral expert in some field if one holds a particular professional position, has been sanctioned by society, has a credential, or passes a specific threshold of skill. One may be considered an expert if one passes the BAR examination, has a counseling certification, or is part of a societal institution that sanctions their expertise such as a scientist or religious authority, or practices an activity at a certain skill level such as football players in the NFL. Part of why we may be skeptical about moral expertise is that these things clearly do not exist for moral expertise in the way they do for non-moral expertise. There are no specific societal jobs titled moral expert, concrete tests for standards of moral expertise, nor institutions or leagues where groups of moralists practice at a high level. It does not follow from this that they could not hypothetically exist.

Various fields from psychology (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) to phenomenology (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991) to social epistemology (Gilligan, 1993; Jones, 1999) have attempted to determine criteria for what would constitute a moral expert². I will not be using the criteria from these theories as they attempt to define moral expertise in a non-

² At least theories of moral development would imply those who have achieved a higher level of moral development to be moral experts.

deflationary manner by supplying necessary and sufficient conditions indexed to being above an objective standard. These kinds of definitions of moral expertise are arbitrary and not indexed to the morally relevant consideration for deference, this being that they are more reliable than you regarding morality. Having a degree, a particular position in society, or the endorsement of society generally does not inherently guarantee that one is more likely to be right on any moral matter.

There are some who think that a conception of moral expertise is only meaningful when it is imbedded in a particular tradition or community. This is a debate regarding how exactly moral expertise is gained or developed. They argue that the modern secular conception of moral expertise as consisting in the armchair discovery of universal rules is individualistic, makes morality a matter of opinion, and lacks foundation or meaning without a social context, shared understanding of human goods, or community. That morality is a practice that is developed over time rather than discovered. This debate can be hashed out at many different levels depending upon the particular metaethics and first order moral theory we hold, of which Anscombe (1958) and MacIntyre (2013) take the former claims to bolster arguments for virtue ethics. Part of the debate is between universalism and contextualism of which the former is the claim that moral judgement consists of applying rules that hold in all times, places, and for all individuals regardless of the contexts of the situation, and the latter that claims that the application of moral rules is less absolute, or cut and dry, and are in some sense up to interpretation that requires knowledge of the contexts of specific situations. I am inclined to think that some moral rules are universalizable, and others may not be and that there may be more than one way to come to gain moral knowledge. Morality obviously involves the interactions between people, so I don't think that one who has had no interaction with anyone would have moral knowledge as morality does

not exist in a microcosm. My definition of moral expertise need not take a definitive stance as to which is correct in that I believe it to be compatible with either, but I may need to answer the question as to whether moral expertise can exist in any meaningful sense outside the confines of a particular tradition or community. I think that it can.

Firstly, I think it can be the case if we hold the source of morality to be anything other than cultural relativism, of which I have argued for in the previous sections. Moral expertise would transcend culture or tradition because what makes something good or right is dependent upon objective, mind independent facts about the world rather than something being right because one's culture, society, religion, government, or family says it is so. I think I agree with MacIntyre (2013) and Anscombe (1958) that some sort of first principles need to be shared in order to understand and transmit moral knowledge, but I don't believe this is constrained by culture or tradition, but constrained by whether one has the capacities of a moral agent. One must share the same language and understanding of the usage of common moral terms, but to understand the reasons why something is morally right or wrong does not require that I be from the same tradition. It actually seems that a moral expert who has knowledge of multiple moral traditions will be better equipped to explain moral reasons than one from a singular tradition. In the circumstances we are concerned with here it also seems that if one is confused as to what to do then the tradition that they come from has failed to supply them with answers anyway. This may help alleviate a worry that individuals will only pursue individuals within their own traditions for answers. Even if morality is not discovered, but constructed, and some constructivist views do devolve into a level of subjectivism, it is not inherently incompatible with objectivity. There are those such as Kant (1785) and Rawls (1999) who have attempted to determine objective moral rules through things such as hypothetical agreement by ideal rational

individuals or procedures of practical reasoning through the categorical imperative. While in reality there may not be certain moral rules that we see followed or agreed upon by every culture, this does not mean they do not exist or that there are not human goods that transcend all cultures.

In contrast to the definitions of moral expertise presented in the prior paragraphs, I take a similar view to many of the authors in the literature that moral expertise is a deflationary and comparative concept. To be a moral expert is to be better at making moral judgements or doing moral actions compared to another reference class³. “The view I find most plausible is contrastive in the sense that a claim that someone is an expert is understood relative to a contrast class. There is a sense, on this view, in which all normal adult human beings are moral experts because they are experts relative to the class of five-year-old children. The interesting contrast (in moral expertise discourse) is that with the ‘normally performing adult’” (Driver, 2013, p. 284).

I agree with the contrast view and the relative class of normally performing adults, but for the phenomenon I will be dealing with here I want to take it one step further and propose the reference class as oneself as a normally performing adult. This is the stance of David Enoch (2014), whose argument I will be laying out more explicitly later in this project, but the argument is essentially that if one gets moral advice from someone that one knows, or at least wholeheartedly believes, to be more reliably correct than oneself on moral matters, one ought to defer to what they say. The view is relative in that I am concerned here with individuals who are moral experts compared to oneself, and deflationary, as opposed to the conception that a moral

³ “A is expert on a type of subject matter *m*, relative to another person B, just if A has at her disposal epistemic resources useful for settling questions which fall under *m*, resources which B lacks” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 625). “All I will be assuming regarding the person to be deferred to (the *expert* in one sense of this term) is that the deferring subject believes the expert is much more likely to be right on the relevant question” (Enoch, 2014, p. 232). Wang (2023) takes Enoch’s definition to be his own.

expert is one that passes a certain agreed upon standard of skill such that they become experts upon surpassing that threshold. This would mean that anyone that is better at morality in relation to yourself is a moral expert relative to you but may not be a moral expert relative to others. This also essentially answers question 2) as to who moral experts are in that it is anyone one knows or believes to be more reliable than oneself regarding morality.

When proposing this project to others I have found that at this point in the dialogue, upon having presented an argument for the existence of moral experts using the above definition, a particular question arises consistently such that I believe I should acknowledge it and yet push it to the side as less important than one may think. How does one identify moral experts? We can see this question to be less important if we return to the points regarding the epistemology of morality from the previous section. If one believes that morality is knowable and that moral knowledge can be transferred to others, then the issue somewhat dissolves as whichever moral epistemology one proscribes to can explain how we could know or justifiably believe one to be a moral expert relative to ourselves. If one can either recognize the good and the bad upon experiencing it post facto, or determine some good through a priori reasoning, then one can recognize when another individual does good generally.

As noted, it is not my place here to lay out and determine a particular moral epistemology. One could hold a rationalist, empiricist, intuitionist, or pluralist moral epistemology and explain how to identify moral experts, but that would be a project for another time. Both the major authors I will be engaging with similarly sidestep this problem. “But although it may be difficult to identify moral experts, this is not a particularly deep or in principle an insurmountable problem. Few people, if any, can properly be described as experts on all moral matters. But to discover someone who has better judgment or more experience than

you about some single moral issue and who seems generally trustworthy is not that difficult” (Hills, 2009, pp. 96-97). “Often, moral deference is problematic for reasons that in this paper I have set aside by stipulation (for instance....worries about how to recognize the experts)” (Enoch, 2014, p. 258). This is not to say that their lack of grappling with the problem justifies my not doing so, but simply that the focus of our projects is on whether one should defer to moral experts given deliberating on moral testimony is a genuine moral quandary. This is a project for another time or philosopher.

Before we return to the question I began with regarding whether moral expertise is the same or different from non-moral expertise such that it would affect whether it would make sense to defer to them or not, I want to make one more useful distinction on my view regarding moral experts. I, like Julia Driver (2013), propose that dialogue within the literature regarding moral expertise has been unproductive in conflating what seem to be different forms of moral expertise under the single umbrella term of ‘moral expert.’ While this use of moral experts as a monolithic term is still domain specific with the domain being anything that constitutes a moral quandary, this is much too broad of a domain.

I accept Driver’s distinction between moral experts in judgment, practice, and analysis. This is the idea that individuals can be moral experts in different ways and areas of morality. An expert in moral judgment is better at making moral judgements regarding moral quandaries, possibly the moral philosopher. An expert in moral action is one who more reliably acts morally right than others, perhaps a saint or humanitarian. Lastly, an expert in moral analysis is one who has greater insight into the nature of morality than others, maybe the metaethicist (Driver, 2013, p. 283). This distinction can help us explain various phenomena regarding why it is that some who may be experts in moral judgment may not be experts in moral practice. In considering who

we would likely want to defer to, it would be those who are moral experts in judgment and practice in that they not only reliably act morally well but do so according to and because of correct moral judgments. The reason I say we would want to consider a moral expert in both areas is that a moral expert of this kind is not only going to know what is right or wrong, but also how to bring good things about. An expert in judgement may be able to determine whether something is good or bad but may not know what to do about it. An expert in action alone may act for the wrong reasons or the wrong moral judgements but end up doing the right thing. Having these two abilities makes for a more reliable moral expert. Now that we have properly laid down the groundwork regarding moral expertise, we can consider the various stances within the literature regarding deferral to moral expertise.

1.4. Optimism, Pessimism, and the Asymmetry Problem

Returning to the main thrust of the paper regarding deferral to experts, we must make a distinction in types of deferral to moral experts: pure moral deference and impure moral deference. Pure moral deference being cases where deferral is based upon some moral knowledge or normative considerations that the moral expert possesses that the individual who defers does not. Impure moral deference is where one defers because the moral expert has knowledge of non-moral or descriptive facts that the individual who defers lacks. It is cases of pure moral deference that are considered problematic and what I will focus on here. To get a better grasp of what pure moral deference would constitute, we may consider an example:

Case A: After carefully reflecting on the question of whether eating meat is immoral, I become convinced that it is.

Case B: You tell me that eating meat is immoral. Although I believe that, left to my own devices, I would not think this, no matter how long I reflected, I adopt your attitude as my

own. It is not that I believe that you are better informed about potentially relevant non-moral facts (e.g., about the conditions under which livestock is kept, or about the typical effects of eliminating meat from one's diet). On the contrary, I know that I have all of the non-moral information relevant to the issue that you have (Mcgrath, 2009, p. 321).

While this case does not refer to moral expertise it is an example of deferral, and it would be implied that one has a reason for deferring as opposed to wantonly accepting the statements of others as correct. I stipulate here that this reason would be that the individual in question has some moral knowledge that you lack or that one thinks them to be more likely to be correct than yourself. We may naturally and intuitively think that there may be something wrong about acting in case B, but we must provide some reason as to why this is the case. Several philosophers have attempted to explain why we have this intuition that deference in cases like this seems wrong. The belief that there is something substantial in this concern such that deference to moral experts is in some way different from deference to other experts has been dubbed “the asymmetry problem” (Driver, 2006).

This asymmetry refers to whether we think moral expertise to be the same or different from non-moral expertise. If the two are the same in all the relevant considerations, we may think deferral to moral experts to be perfectly reasonable. If they are different in some way, we must consider whether deferral to moral experts would still be legitimate due to the difference. On opposing sides of this debate are those who believe that we should and are required to deliberate autonomously on moral matters, dubbed pessimists, and those who claim that this asymmetry is illusory or explainable in some way such that accepting testimony on moral matters is no different from non-moral matters, the oppositely named optimists (Hills, 2009).

So, optimists, as the connotation of the word implies, think we ought to defer, and pessimists, similarly connotated, that we ought not defer.

It is important that we make a distinction between what I will call strong and weak optimism and pessimism. These refer to the extent to which either side finds it legitimate or not to defer to moral experts when certain criteria of the circumstance are met. A strong optimist would think it is always legitimate to defer while a strong pessimist would think it is never legitimate to defer. Almost nobody would claim a strong version of either camp. The weak optimist would want to be able to consider the illegitimacy of deferring in cases where the moral expert is mistaken, lying, biased, or deceiving and the weak pessimist would want to be able to consider the reasonability of deferral in cases where we lack moral education, cannot separate ourselves from our biases, cannot achieve moral understanding, or cannot remain agnostic (Hopkins, 2007, p. 613). If nobody takes the strong stance on either side, we may wonder why making this distinction necessary; I do so to show that the levels at which one is a weak optimist or pessimist may vary as the criteria for the legitimacy of deferral may vary amongst them.

Our *prima facie* intuitions when comparing moral and non-moral expertise may be that they are the same in all the relevant respects. If we think it legitimate to defer to non-moral experts, as many do, and moral expertise is the same as non-moral expertise then it would follow that we think it is also legitimate to defer in these cases.

So, considering the ball is in the court of optimists, the pessimists, or those who believe we ought not defer, must provide some reason to explain this asymmetry between moral expertise and non-moral expertise such that we ought not defer. When considering the pessimists' reasons not to defer, the optimist can take two routes to vindicate deferral to moral experts: 1) show that the reasons the pessimist provides for the asymmetry between moral and

non-moral experts fail such that the problem is diffused (Groll & Decker, 2014; Sliwa, 2012) or 2) provide positive arguments for deferral that outweigh the reasons provided by the pessimists (Enoch, 2014). “Many optimists have tried to reject pessimism by constructing counterexamples or by offering debunking explanations for why pure moral deference *seems* wrong but is not (Groll & Decker, 2014). Others take a more positive route and, by appealing to some independent moral principles such as the requirement to minimize the risk of moral wrongdoings, argue that people always have an obligation to defer” (Wang, 2023, p. 594), or in Wang’s optimistic argument, which we will explore later in this chapter, epistemic principles. The arguments about optimism in the quotation differ in two ways, the former being negative arguments in that they refute another argument for pessimism, so an argument *against* pessimism, and the latter positive in that they propose an argument *for* optimism.

In this next section, I will be exploring one of the options for a pessimist, such as myself, of providing epistemic arguments and why I will not be taking this route. These epistemic arguments regard things such as the transfer of knowledge through testimony and logical arguments regarding coherence of beliefs. I will be laying out these arguments to show that 1) epistemic critiques made by the pessimist are not the most effective route for a critique of deferral and 2) that certain traditional views of epistemology propose it is required that we defer. Accepting these two points I can then explore moral arguments regarding pessimism and optimism, in the subsequent chapter, considering there may be those who are not convinced that epistemology is strong enough to require deferral as well as those, including myself, who believe moral arguments to be a better route of critiquing deferral.

1.5. Why Epistemic Arguments for Pessimism Lack Strength

In “What is Wrong with Moral Testimony⁴,” Robert Hopkins (2007) lays out the possible options of arguments which the pessimist can propose in arguing that we ought not defer to moral experts. He does so to argue for what he thinks to be the best arguments that a pessimist can propose, while maintaining a neutral stance as to a definitive answer to the truth or falsity of optimism or pessimism. These options of arguments for pessimists generally fall within two camps; those arguments that constitute epistemic issues regarding moral deference and those that raise moral issues regarding moral deference. The epistemic pessimist arguments, generally construed, regard either an issue with the constitution of moral knowledge or its transfer such that it is not a reliable source of moral testimony. As Hopkins says, “the obstacle lies in a failure to meet some conditions that, in general, is necessary for testimony to be a source of knowledge” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 614). Moral issues on the other hand regard the epistemology in moral deference and testimony to be unproblematic such that moral knowledge can, in fact, be transferred such that it be reasonable to defer on those grounds, but that doing so violates some moral principles we might hold such as moral autonomy, moral understanding, moral justification, etc., such that we ought not defer. “The obstacle to taking moral testimony lies instead in some norm specific to the moral case. Since the epistemology is right, testimony does

⁴ I will be taking a view regarding knowledge transfer in testimony proposed by leading testimony scholar Jennifer Lackey (2011). The statement view: for every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that *p* on the basis of A’s testimony that *p* only if 1) A’s statement that *p* is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, 2) B comes to truly believe that *p* on the basis of the content of A’s statement that *p*, and 3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that *p* (Lackey, 2011, p. 85). This acts as a base view regarding testimony that proposes a hearer must have some non-testimonial positive reasons for believing the speaker to be reliable as well as no negative reasons to disbelieve them. Defeaters themselves are beliefs regarding reasons to doubt the credibility of the attestor. Thus, undefeated defeaters are simply defeaters that have not themselves been defeated i.e. one has a belief regarding a reason to doubt the credibility of an attestor that itself has not been defeated by some reason that would bring the prior belief into doubt. Conditions 1) and 3) could be cashed out in different ways regarding what one constitutes as both positive reasons to trust in an attestor as well as what constitutes an epistemic defeater. See (Lackey, 2011) for more.

make moral knowledge available. However, some further norm renders it unacceptable to exploit that resource” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 614). I will return to moral arguments in chapter 2.

My goal in this section is reminiscent of the goal of Hopkins essay, which is not to vindicate the epistemology of moral deference but show that epistemic arguments may not be a viable argument for the pessimist to explain the intuition that deferral to moral expertise is illegitimate. Rather than going through all of Hopkins’ proposed epistemic arguments for pessimism, it may be useful to construe them as falling into three camps: 1) moral knowledge does not exist (Hopkins, 2007, pp. 615-618), 2) moral knowledge does exist, but cannot be transferred due to the fact that it differs from non-moral knowledge (Hopkins, 2007, pp. 618-620) , or 3) moral knowledge exists and can be transferred, but some epistemic qualifier is not met such that the deferral would be unreliable (Hopkins, 2007, pp. 620-621) and if any of these hold we have reason not to defer. Hopkins presents counters to each of the epistemic arguments he proposes in order to show that solely epistemic arguments are not a strong move for those who think we have reasons not to defer to moral experts.

The first argument that moral knowledge does not exist ties directly to my remarks in section 1.2 about what we would have to grant epistemically for moral expertise to exist, namely that moral knowledge does exist. According to Hopkins, the general issue for pessimists, including myself, is that taking these arguments often commits the pessimist to metaethical positions that would undermine the very argument they are trying to make. It is important that we remember that the pessimist is a moralist⁵, just as the optimist is, and wants to make positive

⁵ A moralist being one who regards morality to be true such that they are concerned with principles and problems of a normative nature. The pessimist, as a moralist, still has beliefs regarding what moral principles are true, and which are not. They are not moral nihilists or non-cognitivists who have no concern regarding morality because they believe it to not exist or not constitute claims that can be true or false. As a pessimist, I am a moralist and will be proposing first order normative claims throughout this work.

claims about morality, namely that we ought to deliberate about morality ourselves.

Definitionally the only thing the pessimist is committed to is that when we have the option to defer to a moral expert, we have reasons not to do so. This claim need not be bolstered by a second order metaethical claim regarding the metaphysical or epistemic status of morality. The proposition that we have reasons not to defer and morally deliberate ourselves requires the making of a first order moral claim so it would not be in the pessimist's own interest to posit that moral knowledge cannot be known. Doing so would undermine the claims they pose as pessimists. According to Hopkins, committing oneself to 1) moral knowledge does not exist, often commits oneself to non-cognitivism, error theory, or nihilism because those are the routes that can debunk moral knowledge. They are often claims of the type that moral properties do not exist, moral claims are not the sort of things that can be true or false, moral claims are expressions of sentiment, etc. and therefore moral knowledge does not exist. Any of these claims would undermine part of the pessimist project.⁶

Hopkins' argument regarding 2) that moral knowledge exists but is not of the epistemic nature that it can be transferred, focuses on a pessimist argument that moral knowledge is 'know how' not 'know that.' It is commonly proposed by epistemologists that 'know-how' cannot be transferred through testimony because it does not consist in propositional content and therefore does not involve beliefs (Hopkins, 2007, p. 619). It seems, however, that whatever is involved in constituting moral knowledge must involve belief i.e. beliefs about what one should do, and why one should do it (Hopkins, 2007, p. 619). This must mean that moral knowledge is not a form of

⁶ Hopkins proposes an argument the pessimist could make that either moral expertise does not exist or that expertise is not necessary for deferral (Hopkins, 2007, pp. 623-625). I will not be engaging with this argument as it is to avoid the very phenomena I am engaging with in this piece as I take moral experts to exist. If moral expertise was hypothetically possible and would improve your likelihood of acting in a morally correct manner because they possess expertise, ought one defer?

'know-how', which would mean it is in fact transferable, so it would be fine to defer, or it is the case that know-how does involve some form of belief. Hopkins' arguments seem to show that moral knowledge is likely not 'know-how' so it would remain epistemically acceptable to defer, so not a good move for a pessimist.⁷

Lastly, in regard to arguments concerning reliability, disagreement among moral experts, and our confidence in them (Hopkins, 2007, pp. 620-621). Hopkins shows that these concerns do not completely eradicate deferral to moral expertise because they simply add caveats to when we should defer and the level of caution in doing so, rather than prove we should simply not defer at all. Say that there are two moral experts who come from different traditions who we take to have similar track records in their moral action or moral claims, and they give us diametrically opposed advice on a particular moral problem that is internally consistent within their traditions. This disagreement could make us inclined to think there to not be moral expertise in a meaningful sense beyond opinion.

Sarah McGrath considers a similar concern in "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise," (2008) although in her work and others the concern is disagreement between yourself and an 'epistemic peer' who one has "no more reason to think they are in error than you are" (p. 91). Considering we are taking the moral expert to be more likely to be right than yourself, this concern does not arise in our case. However, another problem of disagreement may arise when we consider two individuals who we take to be equally more likely to be right than ourselves, but who give diametrically opposed moral advice. We sometimes do ask for a 'second opinion' from another expert in other areas so this could happen regarding morality. This is a problem that takes place more within the metaethics of moral expertise than the first order problem of deferral

⁷ For more regarding Hopkins' argument see (Hopkins, 2007).

to said experts insofar as it can put pressure both on morality as either being not metaphysically objective or epistemically suspect as not constituting moral knowledge. I think McGrath successfully diffuses the metaphysical problem in that if we conclude that there are no moral facts, they are relative, or expressions of emotion because there is disagreement, then this applies to many other areas, not just morality. We do not leap to the conclusion that because scientists disagree or religious authorities disagree, that there is no fact of the matter or that their claims are simply opinion. Secondly, arguments of this kind are inferences to the best explanation and one of those explanations can simply be one of the two people is wrong.

However, I think the epistemic concern still stands and does put considerable pressure on the existence of moral experts. There are some ways that an argument like this could be challenged: 1) similarly to the rejoinder against the metaphysical argument; we can claim that this argument also overgeneralizes regarding epistemology in other domains. If a moral expert can be said to not know something because an ‘epistemic peer’ who they have no more reason to think they are in error than themselves disagrees, we would need to say this is the case for other domains where we might think it reasonable to 2) the problem devolves into a problem of recognizing moral experts. McGrath claims there are “no independent checks for moral expertise” and one could contest this.

Regarding deferral, I argue that this concern about disagreement amongst moral experts poses a greater problem for the optimist than the pessimist. If we should defer to moral experts, then it brings forth the question about which moral expert we should defer to if we evaluate them to both be more likely to be right than ourselves. The pessimist on the other hand can claim that you should not defer to either of them or that ultimately this becomes a project of evaluating both of their arguments which may make it more likely that you will come to understand. If there is

uncertainty about which expert is right then we have reason not to defer in that there is a higher likelihood of deferring to the wrong person. There may be a worry that one will simply side with the expert they agree with more, but if this is a case where you are uncertain then you wouldn't have a preconceived notion of the right answer to side with. There may still be a concern about siding with the expert that has more in common with you, but if our agent in the case is uncertain and actually concerned with getting things right, it is not obvious how this would be a good method for doing so. We are currently in a circumstance of uncertainty, so we may not have a preconceived notion as to the right answer to match the expert. It may be more beneficial for my purposes arguing for moral understanding that one consult more than one moral expert as seeing different perspectives and evaluating their comparative strengths and weakness would make one more likely to develop moral understanding regarding the particular circumstance than only getting advice from one or even the same expert every time.

This section has not been to necessarily say that Hopkins' arguments are correct, but to highlight the problems with making epistemic arguments as a pessimist and that they may provide the pessimist with hesitation to take the route of using epistemic debunking arguments to prove we should not defer. To further support this conception that there is likely a better route for the pessimist we can consider the positive epistemic argument of Yuzhou Wang (2023), who postulates that not only does the epistemology work regarding deferral, but that it is epistemically required that we do so.

1.6. A Positive Epistemic Argument for Deferral

Yuzhou Wang's epistemic argument for optimism regarding pure moral deference is that not doing so is irrational in that it violates epistemic norms of belief closure and belief consistency. Belief closure being that in considering our set of beliefs we also believe other

propositions that our beliefs imply. “If one believes p and one believes that p implies q , then one must either believe q or give up one or both of their initial beliefs” (Wang, 2023, p. 594). Here is an example from Wang:

I believe that there are gifts under the Christmas tree, and I believe that if there are gifts, they must have been brought by Santa Claus, then I should either (1) believe that Santa Claus brought me the gifts or (2) give up my belief that there are gifts under the Christmas tree and/or my belief that if there are gifts, they must have been brought there by Santa Claus. If I do neither of these, I would violate Belief Closure and thus be irrational (Wang, 2023, p. 594).

Belief consistency, on the other hand, is the epistemic norm that we do not hold contradictory beliefs at the same time. So, one should not or essentially cannot believe P and not P at the same time while remaining consistent. Wang argues that belief closure entails that if we believe someone to be a moral expert, this implies that we also believe that their judgment is more likely to be true than false. He argues that to believe that the moral expert’s judgment is more likely to be true than false and not giving up our initial belief that the claim is false is a violation of belief consistency and belief closure. It is fair to say that believing something to be more likely to be true than false but also believing that this thing is false is epistemically strange. There are four options for the pessimist: 1) give up the belief that A is a moral expert, 2) give up the belief that A is very likely to be right, 3) give up the belief that A says that some moral claim is true or 4) give up the belief that the claim is false and form the belief that the claim is more likely to be true than false (Wang, 2023, p. 596). Wang provides these four options to undermine three of them and force the pessimist into accepting 4) so that they become an optimist about deferral.

Let us look at Wang's arguments as to why three of these options do not work. Option 2) will not work because within the literature this *is* the definition of what a moral expert is (Driver, 2013; Enoch, 2014; Hopkins, 2007; Wang 2023), not to mention that this is the definition I will be using, so similarly this is not an option for a pessimist, such as myself. If we were to no longer believe a moral expert is one who is more likely to be right, then the question of deferral dissolves as this is the reason we would consider deferral in the first place. If they are equally or less likely to be right than us, why would we consider deferral at all? This option also similarly falls into the critique of option 1) I will be getting into shortly. Option 3) does not seem to make much sense in that we would think the opposite of 3) to be true simply from the empirical perception of the moral expert speaking directly to us. It seems strange to bring in an empirical skepticism as to whether I, in fact, was told this and heard this, irrespective of some other reason to be dubious of the moral experts direct, firsthand endorsement of their claim (i.e. being told by a third party that the moral expert made this claim). Option 4) to give up our belief that the moral claim of the moral expert is false according to our deliberation and take on the belief that it is more likely to be true than false. This is essentially the option that Wang's argument wants us to take as an optimist, so clearly this is not an option for the pessimist as it is to concede to deferring by reformatting our belief to that of the moral expert. So, Wang may have proven that we should believe the moral expert to be more likely to be right, but we still have yet to see whether the fact they are more likely to be right is a reason to defer to them. To do this, I will be looking at David Enoch's (2014) argument for this very claim in chapter 2.

So, as Wang says, this only leaves us with option 1) to no longer believe that this is in fact a moral expert, and there are multiple problems with this move. First, this seems to be in some sense, in bad faith, or *ad hoc*, to upon disagreement with the moral expert proclaim that

they are in fact not a moral expert for no other reason than that they disagree with us. More salient points are that this again does not get to the heart of the pessimist objection which, to reiterate, is whether one ought to defer (this is similarly the point that option 2 falls into as referred above). This is because if one is, somehow, not a moral expert there is no longer a question as to whether they should be deferred to. This move simply does not show that one ought not defer even when one is less likely to be correct, which is the point of pessimism in the first place. It appears that none of these options are adequate for the pessimist and as a result refusing to defer to moral experts requires that we violate belief closure and belief consistency. This also supports the argument that, at least epistemically, we are obligated to defer to the moral expert. If this is the case, this requires that pessimists have a strong reason for this irrational behavior.

As a pessimist, I will be arguing that there is a reason for the irrational behavior in that there are *moral* reasons to not defer. While I think that the epistemology surrounding deferral to experts is right or works, I propose that moral reasons outweigh those of epistemology. So, although one ought to defer according to epistemology, one has reason not to defer according to morality. If we think about the domains of some of these non-moral experts such as epistemology, medicine or art, the main goal in these areas is knowledge, health, and aesthetic appreciation. One should defer in so far as doing so furthers one of these ends. One should defer to a moral expert insofar as it furthers the ends of morality, which are often and arguably other regarding. I propose that morality is more important in this sense than achieving the goals of correct knowledge, health, or aesthetic appreciation. One may have reason to think one needs to learn how to morally deliberate oneself for the purposes of achieving the ends of morality rather than the goal of simply maintaining closure or consistency. If one fails to learn for oneself in

these other domains, then one is only worse off in one's hypothetical ends, but if one fails to learn for oneself in morality, then one is worse off in fulfilling the categorical ends of morality. While it is obviously important that one has a correct and true epistemology, this is only important to morality insofar as one has true, correct, or right moral knowledge or judgements. “It follows from the logic of caring that if we care about anything, we must care about truth” (Zagzebski, 2010, p. 353). “I will also argue that epistemic value is always derivative from what we care about, and one of the most important things we care about is morality. There is no independent domain of epistemic value. Moral norms and epistemic norms apply to beliefs for the same reason: they are the demands of what we care about” (Zagzebski, 2010, p. 353). While one could say epistemic consistency and closure are epistemic norms that are also morally required to be a good moral agent, and this is possibly something I could accept, this is not the argument that is being made by Wang. The argument relies on the assumption that we take epistemic norms to be categorical, and they simply are not. I will be going over moral arguments as well as presenting my own in the next chapter.

1.7. Going Forward: Moral Arguments

To this point, I have introduced the philosophical problem regarding deferral to moral expertise. I have explained the metaethics that will be required to think moral expertise to hypothetically exist, and of which I will be accepting. I have laid out the asymmetry problem as well as the stances that can be taken by those engaged with it. Lastly, I have outlined some of the most important articles proposing epistemic arguments regarding the asymmetry problem.

My readers may think it strange that, as a pessimist, I have only really vindicated deferral in proposing the arguments of Wang (2023) and Hopkins (2007), but this will not remain the case. As a pessimist, I will be arguing that there is something less than morally ideal with pure

moral deference. I will be taking Robert Hopkin's advice and will be arguing that there is something morally concerning, as opposed to epistemically concerning with deferring to moral experts (Hopkins, 2007, p. 614). I will be directly addressing David Enoch's "A Defense of Moral Deference" (2014) and arguing against his conclusion that morally we ought to defer. I will be arguing for the moral importance of the epistemic abilities that come with moral understanding as the moral justification for my soft pessimist view. This will require that I elucidate Enoch's argument before I attempt to refute it. I will also be explaining what moral understanding exactly is and the epistemic abilities it fosters and why these are necessary epistemic abilities for being a good moral agent. First, I think it helpful to talk about the other major moral argument for not deferring, those from moral autonomy, and why I am going with an argument from moral understanding instead.

Chapter 2: Moral Arguments Surrounding Deference

2.1. An Overview of the Arguments

In this chapter, I will be covering *moral* arguments regarding optimism and pessimism, as previously contrasted to *epistemic* arguments. As a reminder, these arguments are making claims that the status of morality is such that there are, at the most minimal level, moral reasons to consider deferring or not, depending on whether the argument is one from optimism or pessimism about deferral, and at the strongest level, a claim that we are morally obligated or required to do one or the other. These are distinct from the epistemic arguments we saw in chapter one as the justification for moral arguments does not depend upon claims that according to epistemic standards or states of affairs we should or should not defer. These are arguments that according to moral standards we should or should not defer according to good or bad or right or wrong making features of doing so.

I will be making a weak pessimist argument that in most cases we have good moral reasons for not deferring. I will be making a slightly different argument from some moral arguments because my view will rely upon a moral justification about the morality of having a proper moral epistemology. I will be making claims about our moral obligations towards developing the epistemic abilities necessary to being a good moral agent. I will be saying that we are required to develop certain epistemic abilities and that one of the ways of doing so is to develop moral understanding. This is likely not the only way of developing the necessary abilities, so I will not be saying that one is required to develop or act from moral understanding for our actions to be morally good or right or that doing so without moral understanding is wrong. If moral understanding is a good way to meet the requirements for a good moral

epistemology and a good way to develop moral understanding is to not defer to moral experts, then we have a good moral reason to not defer in most cases. It will be this claim that I will be proposing and defending at length, later in this chapter, but before I do so, it is worth looking at one of the other major pessimistic moral arguments and why I will not be taking this route.

Pessimist arguments that we morally ought not defer to moral experts often take the form of claiming that the act of deferring itself, as opposed to the following through on the act the moral expert prescribes, violates a first order principle of morality itself such that an act of deferral either has no moral worth, or even more egregious, is morally wrong. Some of these types of arguments have an underlying Kantian flavor i.e. morality requires acting with moral autonomy (Driver, 2006; Enoch, 2014; Lillehammer, 2014; Crisp, 2014), with authenticity (Brick, 2024), for the right reasons (Markovits, 2010), with the right intentions (Enoch, 2014), with moral understanding (Enoch, 2014; Hills, 2016; Hills, 2009; Hopkins, 2007), as the virtuous person would act (Markovits, 2010), or even fostering moral achievement (Enoch, 2014)⁸. Arguments of this sort may concede that there are moral reasons for deferring, but that other countervailing moral considerations outweigh or undermine these moral reasons. As Enoch says these arguments often stem from the thought “that at least when it comes to morality, there is more to worthy action than right action” (Enoch, 2014, p. 246).

There are those, particularly utilitarians, who do not think that there is more to morality than right action, and their conception of morally worthy action lies in the outcomes of our actions and the joy or suffering that they promote. They do not believe how the action was done, why the action was done, whether the action was one that would be done by one with a virtuous

⁸ All the arguments in which Enoch is cited here he addressed and argued against, rather than for, in his piece “A Defense of Moral Deference,” except moral achievement. A lack of moral achievement is Enoch’s answer as to why we might have what he thinks is an incorrect intuition that one should not defer to moral experts.

character, etc, is morally relevant. The moral reason for not deferring under a utilitarian framework would need to be the instrumental value of doing so towards maximizing utility. Arguments from one of the other two major branches: deontology and virtue ethics, will require a claim about the intrinsic value of certain ways of acting morally. I, like the two other major figures in the moral expertise literature, Enoch and Hills, will not be making an argument at the level of proclaiming the truth of a particular moral theory. To do so requires one take many more truths to be the case regarding morality itself and the falsehood of many others rather than positing a singular truth regarding morality that would give us reason not to defer, namely the development of certain epistemic abilities. To return to the matter at hand, I just listed many of the moral arguments from pessimists in the literature so let us consider moral arguments from optimists, or those who think we have moral reason for deferring to moral experts.

The opposing moral arguments from optimists propose that either the moral arguments from the pessimists fail such that there is nothing morally wrong with deferring, nor are we morally required to not defer, such that deferring to moral expertise is morally permissible by default (Sliwa, 2012; Groll and Decker, 2014) or they propose a positive moral principle as to why we are morally obligated or required to defer over and above deferral being simply morally acceptable or permissible. This includes Enoch's Requirement to Minimize Risk of Wrongdoing (Enoch, 2014, p. 241) which is probably the strongest optimist principle for deferral which has been proposed, of which we will be exploring in section 2.3. There is a particular lack of optimists proposing moral principles that require we defer, but a significant number have attempted to debunk pessimist arguments. A relatively new and unique principle arguing for deferral that has been put forward is that in discounting or not trusting moral expertise from marginalized individuals one is engaging in a sort of 'testimonial injustice' (Fricker, 2007; Jones,

1999; Leigh Pearlman, 2023).⁹ I won't be engaging with this principle here because it likely only applies in particular and specific instances where the moral action being proposed by the moral expert, who is also a marginalized individual, involves a decision on behalf of a group of marginalized individuals rather than the deferral to moral experts in an interpersonal context generally.

Now that I have outlined the different ways that moral arguments can approach the question of deferral, I will be engaging with only the most prevalent views of both sides within the literature. In section 2.2. I will be considering the other major pessimistic argument against deferral, arguments from moral autonomy, and why I have opted against this route. Section 2.3. will be an explanation of the view of David Enoch that the moral principle of minimizing the risk of wrongdoing requires that we defer to moral experts. In section 2.4. I will attempt to refute this claim. Sections 2.5. will be an explanation of Allison Hills' argument regarding moral understanding and in section 2.6. I propose my own view.

2.2. Moral Autonomy

The argument that we should not defer for reasons of moral autonomy can be put quite succinctly by the 20th century virtue ethicist, Elizabeth Anscombe, “to take one’s morality from someone else- that, it might be held, would make it not morality at all; if one takes it from someone else, that turns it into a bastard sort of morality, marked by heteronomy.” Before unpacking this quote, we ought to get clear on what is meant by the words autonomy and heteronomy. The word “autonomy” comes from the Greek roots ‘auto’ (self) and ‘nomos’ (law/governing). Arguments from moral autonomy can be construed following the same lines

⁹ I cite Fricker (2007) here as the first to coin the terms ‘epistemic injustice’ and ‘testimonial injustice.’ Jones (1999) proposes that some form of moral expertise may be constituted by local knowledge by those who have experienced directly instances of morally salient things such as sexism, homophobia, racism, etc. Leigh Pearlman (2023) is the philosopher who has proposed this principle and argument regarding moral expertise and deference.

that either morality requires that one is self-governing in deliberating and adopting the moral principles they act upon or to a lesser extent that the formulation of their moral principles ought to be done independently and without what is often called heteronomy¹⁰. Immanuel Kant was one of the major proponents for a view such as this, as can be seen in his *Groundwork to The Metaphysics of Morals*. He has a section titled “The Autonomy of the Will as the Supreme Principle of Morality” (pp. 36-37) followed by a section titled “The Heteronomy of the Will as the Source of All Spurious Principles of Morality” (p. 37) where he states:

A will is looking for a law that will tell it what to do: if it looks *anywhere except in the fitness of its maxims* to be given as universal law, going outside itself and looking for the law in the property of any of its objects, *heteronomy always results*. For in that case the law is not something the will gives to itself, but rather something that the external object gives to the will through its relation to it. This relation, whether it rests on preference or on conceptions of reason admits of only hypothetical imperatives (Kant, 1785, p. 37).

Kant’s argument here proposes some very strong claims about the nature of morality and autonomy and is quite complex and multifaceted. Kant’s claim relies upon further claims in *The Groundwork* where he argues that the origin of morality lies in our rational nature to deliberate on our maxims or rules for action and that morality itself consists in willing these maxims into the world through our actions by making sure they are universalizable according to what he calls the categorical imperative. To take one’s maxims from another would be to not rationally deliberate on them ourselves, nor would we be willing our own maxims, but those of others. We do not adopt them as our own simply by acting upon them, but by seeing that they accord with the categorical imperative. The most important part to note here about Kant’s claims is that the

¹⁰ Heteronomy is the state of being governed or ruled by an outside force, or the condition of being under the domination of an outside authority.

justification for not deferring is not instrumental towards better moral action, but an intrinsically valuable requirement of morality itself. The main reason I will not be making an argument such as this is that it requires the adoption of a particular moral theory and/or very strong claims regarding the nature of morality that if were to fail, the entire argument would fall. It would require that we take intrinsic values to be either central to morality, or at least of moral import. The above quote requires autonomy to be inherent to either a socially constructed or objective morality depending on our reading of Kant.

In some sense all pessimist argument are arguments from autonomy insofar as they argue that we should deliberate ourselves rather than deferring to others, but whether we classify an argument as an argument from autonomy is dependent upon the moral justification being done by autonomy in the argument. If the claim is that there is a moral principle or obligation such that we are required to deliberate autonomously for its own sake or that there is something morally wrong about giving up autonomy, then an argument such as this would constitute an argument from autonomy. If, like I will be proposing, we should deliberate autonomously from some other moral justification or reason, then it does not constitute an argument directly from autonomy because the justification is not from autonomy, but something else. For example, one could argue that one should deliberate autonomously because this will make us more likely to act correctly in the future. If there is a moral requirement to act correctly, and most if not all moral theories have this requirement, then one might be obligated or have reason to deliberate autonomously. My justification for why we might have reason to deliberate autonomously, which I will be presenting later in this chapter, has to do with the instrumental value of moral understanding for fostering the required epistemic abilities of a good moral agent.

While I think that an argument for autonomy could be successful, I think it has more to overcome than I would be able to defend. Arguments from autonomy, like those above from Kant and Anscombe, must claim that acting autonomously is required by morality. There really does not seem to be a further justification behind this claim, apart from the Kantian claim that engaging in morality is a sort of construction of morality through adopting maxims and expressing them through our acts of will. We might not hold this intuitively, especially if we think that one could be successful in moral action while acting heteronomously. This seems to require that acting autonomously is intrinsically valuable, which itself is not going to have a further justification, and will stand or fall by our intuitions. Secondly, Enoch provides some convincing rebuttals against the claim for autonomy's intrinsic value (Enoch, 2014, pp. 246-251), which I can avoid with claims that autonomy has instrumental value. Lastly, an argument like this may require the adoption of a particular moral theory, like Kantian deontology, which I have been attempting to avoid. Before I present my own view, I must defend against one of the most prominent moral arguments for deferral to moral experts in the moral expertise literature.

2.3. Regarding a Moral Argument for Optimism

In his 2014 paper, "A Defense of Moral Deference", David Enoch provides what is one of the most prevalent moral arguments for optimism regarding deference to moral experts. He proposes a moral principle that, if accepted, would morally require that we defer to moral experts. I have taken on the same definition of moral expertise as him to avoid claims that we are not talking about the same concept. Namely, "all I will be assuming regarding the person to be deferred to is that the deferring subject believes the expert is much more likely to be right on the relevant question" (Enoch, 2014, p. 232). He also has a similar view regarding metaethics, particularly that the debate should not hinge the holding of a particular metaethic, as long as

moral judgements can be ranked according to some standard. “Let us drop all talk of moral truth, and fact, and belief, and knowledge, and representation, and mind-independence, and objectivity, and certainly of irreducibility. Let us just assume—incredibly minimally—that not all seemingly moral judgements are on a par, that some are, as I shall say, in some way more okay than others” (Enoch, 2014, p. 234). While I may not be willing to take things as far as him, this similarly gets at my third metaethical point in section 1.2 that moral expertise requires moral claims to be better or worse according to some criteria. We also agree that moral arguments supersede epistemic arguments regarding deference to moral experts. “Even if deference-based moral judgements are epistemically suspicious, still we should act on them” (Enoch, 2014, p. 234).

To elucidate his argument and propose his moral principle for deference, Enoch uses a hypothetical example of himself and his friend Alon. The example is paraphrased as follows: as time has gone by Enoch has seen Alon react to the various conflicts in the Middle East in a way where his judgements and actions have been reliably morally correct. Enoch himself finds himself to be much slower in his deliberation and started off with the opposite view of Alon. He comes to realize that Alon has been right much more frequently than he regarding these moral quandaries. He now must decide whether to vote for or against funding a particular war. He is aware that regardless of which decision he makes, bad things such as the loss of innocent life will occur. However, he believes that funding the war is the right thing to do, but Alon tells him otherwise and that the war is morally unjustifiable. In this circumstance Enoch stipulates that the reason for accepting and acting on Alon’s claim isn’t that Alon has access to some non-moral facts Enoch himself doesn’t or that Alon is in some way unbiased, but simply that Alon is more likely to be right than not. In this circumstance we do not even know how Alon made his judgment, what his reasons are, or whether he would act on his own judgments. Enoch thus

argues that due to the moral importance of getting it right in this situation it is morally required that he defer to Alon's judgment and vote to not fund the war (Enoch, 2014, pp. 230-236).

To put his argument simply given a circumstance of interpersonal context where we are morally uncertain about what we ought to do, and we either wholeheartedly believe or justifiably believe that the moral expert is more likely to get it right than us, we ought to act on their testimony. To not defer and deliberate ourselves would be to accept a higher risk of forming a false moral judgement and therefore a higher risk of acting wrongly and in doing so risking wronging others. "If there are no other relevant costs, why on earth wouldn't I minimize this risk?" (Enoch, 2014, p. 241). This he calls "the requirement to minimize risk of wrongdoing" a requirement which he believes is "so minimal that it should be accepted by the proponents of just about any plausible normative moral theory" (Enoch, 2014, pp. 241-242).

In considering what we are giving up in not deferring Enoch says we can 'dramatize the matter,' by considering the outcome in the previous example regarding the war where it is the case that the war is morally indefensible, but we decide to fund it, thinking it is justifiable (Enoch, 2014, p. 243). Consider the family members of the wronged come to us criticizing our decision and asking for justification. We may reply that we were uncertain about what was morally right to do and that we did all we could to find out. They may retort that they know Alon had told us otherwise and knowing him to be more likely to be right, it seems we have disregarded a more reasonable way available to us for coping with moral certainty. "It no longer seems that I can answer in good faith that I did what I could to find out about the moral status of the war" (Enoch, 2014, p. 243).

There are a few reasons why I do not think this 'dramatization of the matter' is helpful to Enoch's argument. Firstly, it may be possible that rather than being a reliable intuition pump it

may be guiding us using emotion to determine what we think about the matter. Secondly, there are those who have argued the opposite claim that the importance of moral matters requires that we have justification for our actions and that not deferring may help us be more certain in doing so (Hopkins, 2007). We can see this by considering the same scenario, but where we have deferred to Alon and voted to not fund the war, but he was in fact wrong¹¹ and the war was morally justifiable. The family members of the wronged will come to us and criticize us and ask for justification. What will we say? Something along the lines of ‘I just did what Alon said, and he is usually right about things like this.’ It seems we similarly have no good faith justification for why we did what we did or can give reasons why we thought our actions be moral. We may think that a reply such as this is in some sense morally hollow, and our interlocutor may retort with questions regarding why we didn’t think about it ourselves or better yet why we did not ask Alon for justification of his judgement.

This connects to a third reason regarding Enoch’s overly dichotomous conception of deferral. It seems there are only two options: do what the moral expert says or do not and the former constitutes deferral and the latter non deferral. In reality there is nothing stopping us from asking for justification from the moral expert regarding their judgement. Upon getting a justification I may think through the justification myself and determine it to be correct and then act upon it. Have I therefore deferred? It seems not. We can consider a similar non moral example where I go to a car shop to diagnose my car. The mechanic may diagnose a particular part, and I could just go with his judgement and have him fix it or take it home and try to determine if his judgement is correct. If I determined that the mechanic was right on my own, I would not have deferred to him but would have concurred with him. Essentially deferral has an

¹¹ It is important we remember the moral expert is more likely to be right, not that they are always right. There is still the off chance that we defer, and they are wrong.

aspect of offloading to it rather than just being constituted by whether I accept the judgement or not.

Furthermore, I believe something needs to be said regarding Enoch's use of the term 'more likely to be right' as he does not state exactly what he means by this. The statement could seem to imply that chance is involved in morality, which in the sense of moral luck it does, but by chance here I mean the implication of percentages of likelihood i.e. a claim that the moral expert's decision has a 60% chance of being right, but a layperson's chances would be 40%. Considering morality has to be indexed to something under both mine and Enoch's view, I do not think this is what he is claiming as the statements of anyone regarding morality are either true or false according to moral standards rather than a claim that moral experts are just better at predicting the future. Another interpretation may be that when presented with a string of moral decisions, the moral expert may get more of them right than you, say 60% to 40% of them. I think this is closer to what Enoch is saying, but this interpretation opens itself up to the problems of luck I mentioned above, but also Humean induction problems. The fact that we have seen an individual act more consistently than us in the past does not necessarily mean they will continue to do so in the future. I think the most plausible interpretation is that a moral expert's judgement, while not a guarantor that their suggestion is right or correct, is going to satisfy more moral principles or requirements than ours will. They will supply us with better moral judgements than we would come to on our own.

To return to the proposed principle of the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing, to refute Enoch's argument one could take two routes: 1) show that this requirement does not in fact hold and/or 2) show that another moral principle outweighs the requirement to minimize risk of wrongdoing. I will be taking the latter route insofar as I will

grant, for the sake of argument, that Enoch's requirement holds. I will be arguing that even if this requirement holds, there are still good reasons to not defer. In conjunction with this argument, I will be proposing the concept of moral understanding as a good instrumental reason not to defer.

2.4. The Requirement to Minimize the Risk of Wrongdoing

The main proviso of Enoch's principle is "the need to minimize the risk of wrongdoing *when all other things are equal*" (Enoch, 2014, p. 244). Why Enoch adds this proviso is because his theory claims that the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing supplies justification for the claim that it is morally required that we defer. One of the things that would need to be equal is the seriousness of the purported wrongs of Alon being right compared to Alon being wrong. So, the seriousness of the wrongs if we defer to Alon and he happens to be wrong, insofar that he is only more likely to be right, vs. the seriousness of the wrongs of Alon being right and our mistake of not deferring to him are equal. His war case works particularly well for this because we are aware that any mistake in deciding whether to fund a war or not may result in the similarly serious wrongs of the deaths of soldiers and civilians, the taking of prisoners of war, the destruction of homes, etc.

This is a factor that Enoch must hold steady because in similar cases of moral uncertainty where the seriousness of the wrongs are not equal, other principles may take effect such that we would be obligated to not defer to the expert to minimize the risk of wrongdoing. "When other things are not equal, other strategies of coping with moral uncertainty may be relevant" (Enoch, 2014, p. 242). This is not to say that we have some ability to determine the seriousness of the wrong as justification for determining a side on our own, but that we have some basic conceptualization of the proportionality of wrongness. This is easy to stipulate as most people would contend that it is *prima facie* a more serious wrong to kill an individual than to lie to them.

To see this further we can consider principles that may override Enoch's requirement when wrongs are not of equal seriousness such as what Enoch calls "erring on the side of safety." The moral expert may put forward an answer to our moral dilemma that may have a small chance of resulting in a more serious wrong and "we do not want to go for a somewhat smaller risk of committing a much more serious wrong than for a somewhat higher risk of committing a much less serious wrong" (Enoch, 2014, p. 244). When making moral decisions, we may have more concerns than simply how likely an event is to occur. We may also be concerned about the kinds of wrongs that may occur. In some circumstances we may be concerned about the actions that are being asked of us by the experts. In circumstances such as these, the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing may not require that we defer to the experts. Enoch replies to such concerns with this remark: "Now, many interesting questions can be asked about this norm, in particular its interaction with other norms and values. But notice that the norm I am appealing to here is much more minimal—it is about the *pro tanto* requirement to minimize risk of wrongdoing, when no other relevant costs are present" (Enoch, 2014, p. 243).

Let's step back for a second and disregard all the complexities of these considerations and possible refutations of this requirement and grant that the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing holds. The concern that I propose for this requirement is that it has been proposed as such a minimal requirement that the likelihood of us being in circumstances where we have access to a moral expert and the seriousness of the wrongs are equal and there are no other prevailing moral requirements is so low that there will be very few cases where we would be required to defer. I propose that Enoch is in this sense a very weak optimist in that a stronger pessimist, such as myself, may accept that in the types of cases that Enoch has presented we may agree that we should defer. We can also consider the intensity or degree with which Enoch is

arguing for this principle the few times it does apply. His is a stronger claim than claims that deference is something that we ought to do, would be good to do, is morally permissible, or is morally praiseworthy, as he uses terms like morally required, implying deference is morally obligatory and not doing so is morally wrong. “In fact, when someone genuinely believes that another is more likely to be right on a moral question, moral deference is not just permissible but rather is morally required. Refusing to defer in such circumstances would amount to unjustifiably accepting a higher risk...of wronging them (others). This is inconsistent with giving one’s morally protected interests the right place in one’s practical reasoning. It would be wrong” (Enoch, 2014, pps. 243-244). We should consider whether this claim is too strong.

It is possible that Enoch has overplayed his hand by arguing for a moral requirement rather than simply that deferring is better than thinking for oneself. It implies that one is under a duty or obligation to do what another says simply because they are more likely to be right than another. While gaining more information or being told something by an individual can put us under a duty or obligation to do certain things, the case here rests upon the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing rather than these other justifications. While it would be wrong to purposefully expose others to a higher risk of wronging them, does deferring not also expose others in a different moral quandary to a higher risk of wronging them insofar as minimizing risk involves probability? Let me explain.

Depending on how we construe probability, either as the probability in particular instances or possible outcomes over time, we may think the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing may have varying results as to whether we should defer or not. Enoch only considers the principle in terms of individual cases such that not deferring increases our risk of being wrong and thus increasing our risk of wronging others such that we should defer. It is

unclear why the principle, being as basic as it is, would only hold for individual instances rather than regarding all our moral actions over time. If we maintain the principle, but extrapolate to probability over time regarding multiple cases, deferring to the expert each time does not increase our chances of being right over time and across instances because it is a stagnant system rather than dynamic. As stipulated by Enoch, we do not know the reasons as to why the moral expert has concluded what they have nor the intricacies of the case that lead to that moral conclusion. As it is uncontroversial according to epistemologists that knowledge can be transferred through testimony, and there would be no reason to defer if this were not the case, and given there is no major difference from moral knowledge and other kinds of knowledge, we may be said to know that the moral act regarding this case is/is not moral insofar as the moral expert knows it to be and has told us, but we could not extrapolate to other cases. Essentially deferring does not promote the cultivation of certain epistemic abilities that are moral in nature. There are going to be times when I am in a significantly similar, but slightly different moral quandary and a moral expert is not available to me for whatever reason. We would think the requirement to minimize the risk of wrongdoing would hold in cases like this as well. Considering I have never learned why the moral action was correct in the previous case where the moral expert told me the right action I will not be able to extrapolate to this case, thus I will be more likely to be wrong in both particular circumstances and circumstances over time such that I have failed to uphold the principle to minimize the risk of wrongdoing. A methodology that has a particular chance of being right or wrong but is dynamic over time has the potential to increase its chance of being right to greater than what it currently is more so than a stagnant system.

Something to briefly consider are circumstances where we are in a time crunch and need to make a moral decision rather quickly. Cases such as this may give us pragmatic, and possibly even moral reasons, for deferring to a moral expert. Considering my positive argument for not deferring is moral understanding, it is possible that we could defer to respond quickly and then reflect after the fact. This could hypothetically increase the number of cases where Enoch's argument gives us reason to defer. I will have more to say regarding this, particularly why deferring disincentivizes reflection thus making moral understanding less likely, in section 3.3. There are a couple ways I could respond to cases like this: 1) stipulate these cases away and propose that cases I am concerned with are ones where we have ample time to consider our options, 2) I could concede that cases such as these are ones where we should defer to moral experts, or 3) place skepticism on the claim that the right thing to do in these circumstances is defer. I do not think any of these options drastically changes my overall argument, but does have implications for what cases are and are not contentious for my view. I will be taking the third option up later in section 3.3, but another reason for skepticism about the level of prevalence of these cases is that these would have to be cases where we have time to consult a moral expert, but also do not have time to reflect, which seems unlikely. The moral expert would just have to happen to be there in a spur of the moment's decision, which I would think are rather uncommon, making these cases contentious for my view, but possibly negligible.

Up to this point in my argument, I have agreed with the morally relevant concerns that Enoch has proposed but have tried to show that his argument is limited to very particular cases where there are no other countervailing concerns, except minimizing the risk of wrongdoing. I then have tried to show that even in those limited circumstances his principle does not get him a requirement to defer to moral experts. Elsewhere in his article he disagrees directly with things

such as moral understanding, autonomy, or intention as being strong enough reasons to undermine his principle. I think this is where we most fundamentally disagree as to the weighing of morally salient features as I take moral understanding to be more important to morality than he does. The particular claim he makes is that “the value of moral understanding never by itself gives us a non-instrumental reason to act in a way that tolerates a greater risk of injustice or of acting immorally” (Enoch, 2014, p. 249). I have tried to show above that having moral understanding could have instrumental value in increasing the likelihood of minimizing wrongdoing over time as opposed to not developing moral understanding such that it would undermine his principle. Say, however, that moral understanding does not have instrumental value and only has intrinsic value to morality. It is unclear why instrumental value is inherently more important than intrinsic value, but part of this depends on what moral theory we take to be true. One way to do so is to claim there is more to morality than outcomes such that instrumentality is not all that matters. I will have more to say about this in Section 3.2.

I will be moving forward with an argument that defends the other major avenue pessimists have taken besides arguments from autonomy, namely arguments from moral understanding. To defend this view, I will be arguing that developing moral understanding is one of the routes we can take to develop the epistemic abilities required of a good moral agent. I will argue that this may give us reason to consider not deferring to moral experts insofar as doing so is to offload the very time, toil, and in some cases motivation, that helps us build a proper moral epistemology. Before I can do this, it is necessary that I explain what understanding is as an epistemic concept and how it differs from knowledge. After this, I will explain the concept of moral understanding through work done by Allison Hills.

2.5. Understanding and Moral Understanding

There has been a move in recent epistemology literature towards considering other epistemic states apart from just knowledge, one of these being understanding. There have been several authors who have argued for understanding as a distinct phenomenon from knowledge such that it has distinct epistemic value (Kvanvig, 2009; Zagzebski, 2001; Pritchard, 2009). Some have argued that its epistemic value lies in the fact that understanding is more secure epistemically than knowledge as it cannot be Gettierized, from the claim that one can have understanding when luck is involved, whereas knowledge cannot (Kvanvig, 2009). This is because understanding only has factivity and grasping requirements such that one could have suspect Gettier style sources of information that happen to be right and understand regardless¹². Others propose understandings value is due to it being a cognitive achievement (Pritchard, 2009), and others that it is pragmatically useful (Elgin, 2007). Understanding literature has mirrored many of the debates regarding epistemology's traditional domain of knowledge: transparency, factivity, luck, internalism vs. externalism, transmissibility via testimony, etc. It is not part of my project here to weigh in regarding these various debates. For my purposes, it is necessary that I show understanding to be distinct from knowledge, and this requires that I properly define it.

We might first look at ordinary language usage surrounding the terms understanding and knowledge and see that they are often used synonymously, but if we look a little deeper the two words are often used in the same sentence to refer to two different phenomena. For example, 'I know the Pythagorean theorem, but I do not understand it.' Like many philosophical problems,

¹² I will be explaining the factivity and grasping requirements below. For more information regarding these arguments, see (Kvanvig, 2009).

looking towards ordinary language usage is not going to get us closer to what exactly understanding is. However, this statement alone implies that one can have knowledge and yet lack understanding. Some have considered looking at phenomenology, or what it feels or seems like to be in an epistemic state of knowledge or understanding. It has been considered that understanding is equivalent to what has been termed the psychological ‘Aha’ moment where something clicks in our minds such that we feel we understand. This is also not going to be indicative of understanding as it is possible we feel we have understanding without actually possessing the epistemic state that is understanding. Like any strong philosophy, we must look at our conceptual intuitions surrounding the terms, the phenomena of knowledge and understanding, and provide potential criteria for when one properly has understanding.

Many epistemologists have agreed that understanding consists of an information component and a grasping component (Boyd, 2017; Grimm, 2006; Hills, 2009; Khalifa, 2013; Kvanvig, 2009; Zagzebski, 2001). It is obvious that for one to have understanding one must have knowledge of a subject matter and information on that subject matter, i.e. an ‘informational component’. What properly explains why individuals can have knowledge yet lack understanding is that knowledge is atomistic, and understanding is holistic and relational. Knowledge consists of possessing individual pieces of information whereas understanding consists of the systemic relationships between pieces of information. Understanding systematic relationships between pieces of information is to ‘grasp’ this relation. This has been construed as a ‘grasping requirement’ for understanding as it “seems to consist of more than just a collection of things that I know” (Boyd, 2017, p. 104). Several philosophers have defined grasping differently, but I will take “grasping to involve the exercise of some kind of cognitive ability or abilities, where instances of grasping involve the relationships between the thing understood and

either the reasons that make that thing true or propositions that are related to it” (Boyd, 2017, p. 104). We may also look at what individuals are able to do when they understand or even what we do to test whether they understand. These consist of things like being able to provide explanations, application to new cases, abilities to use the information in the world, have reflective equilibrium of a noetic system, or to engage in modal considerations.

Being that understanding is domain specific; it has been broken down into various subject matters such as mathematical, aesthetic, scientific, philosophical, and most importantly to us, moral understanding. The understanding in each of these subjects will not be different in kind from understanding generally, but the subject areas will differ regarding their end goals, methodology, tools, as well as understanding's particular value for the respective field. Allison Hills, in her 2009 article “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology,” connects the understanding literature to morality insofar as understanding as an epistemic norm has moral import. For Hills, moral understanding requires that one ‘understand why’ a moral proposition is true and that this requires more than simply ‘knowing that’ it is true and ‘knowing why’ it is true¹³.

If you understand why X is morally right or wrong, you must have some appreciation of the reasons why it is wrong. Appreciating the reasons why it is wrong is not the same as simply believing that they are the reasons why it is wrong, or even knowing that they are the reasons why it is wrong. Moral understanding involves a *grasp* of the relation

¹³ There are what are called WH-compliments to knowledge and understanding. One can have knowledge what (that), knowledge why, knowledge how and there will be similar versions for understanding. ‘Knowledge That’ just takes the form of propositional statements ‘I know x is y,’ ‘Knowledge Why’ will be constituted by propositions that serve as reasons or explanations for some other variable such as ‘I know x is y because z,’ Know How will be constituted by having and expressing particular abilities to achieve particular ends. I.e. ‘I know how to do x.’ I will be taking the same line as Hills here as she argues that understanding is distinct from knowledge such that when one says one knows (any WH compliment) this will not mean the same things as saying one understands (the matching WH compliment).

between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true. You cannot really understand why p is true if p and the reasons why p are the only things about the subject of which you are aware: it is not possible to understand why some isolated fact is true. If you have this kind of appreciation of moral reasons, you must have, at least to some extent, a systematic *grasp* of morality (Hills, 2009, p. 101).

In another work, Hills uses an analogy for grasping the relationship between propositions to the grasping of a ball or cup of tea. “If you grasp a ball, you have it under your control. You can manipulate it. You have a set of abilities or know-how relevant to it, which you can exercise if you choose” (Hills, 2016, p. 663). She proposes that grasping the relationship between propositions will similarly have a set of abilities and know-how of which she calls ‘cognitive control’.

If you understand why p, then you believe that p and that q is why p and in the right sort of circumstances you can successfully:

- (i) follow an explanation of why p given by someone else;
- (ii) explain why p in your own words;
- (iii) draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q;
- (iv) draw the conclusion that p’ (or that probably p) from the information that q’ (where p’ and q’ are similar to but not identical to p and q);
- (v) given the information that p, give the right explanation, q;
- (vi) given the information that p’, give the right explanation, q’ (Hills, 2009, pp. 102-103).

We may be able to see more clearly this dense analytic philosophy in practice if we look at an example. Let us stick with the example provided by Enoch where his friend Alon, who is a moral

expert relative to Enoch, has told him to vote to defund the war because it is morally unjustifiable. Enoch could be said to now know that the war is immoral through the testimonial transmission of Alon. Enoch could not be said to understand why the war is immoral as he cannot even provide an explanation for why the war is immoral because he does not even know why it is immoral. This seems to be easily ameliorated in that it could be stipulated that Enoch asks Alon for an explanation. Say Alon provides an explanation that the war is immoral because ‘it does not have a just cause.’ Enoch could now be said to know that the war is immoral as well as know why it is immoral. However, he could still be said to not understand that the war is immoral as he does not understand why the war is immoral because he still fails to know what about the cause makes it unjust such that he could not extrapolate to other cases nor provide an explanation of his own. He is still not privy to the kinds of causes that make a war unjust nor the particular reason this cause is unjust. Could it be said that the moral expert may simply provide a further explanation of what constitutes the unjust cause in this case? Could understanding be said to be transmitted by a moral expert just providing all the requisite propositional knowledge^{14?15}

Hills does not think so:

I don't think that it is very plausible to identify cognitive control with extra propositional knowledge. For no particular extra number of pieces of propositional knowledge guarantees that you have the grasp required of understanding, the ability to draw conclusions yourself in a new case. And without that guarantee, no amount of propositional knowledge can be sufficient for understanding why p (Hills, 2016, p. 671).

¹⁴ Propositional knowledge simply being ‘knowledge that’ as knowledge of this kind is constituted by declarative statements or propositions with a truth value, such as ‘x is y.’ So, the question here is asking whether moral experts can simply state all the propositions that would be necessary for one to understand without thinking for oneself?

¹⁵ It is generally uncontested that knowledge can be transmitted through testimony in certain circumstances, but as understanding is not equivalent to knowledge it is a different question as to whether understanding can be transferred through testimony.

This regards whether understanding can be transmissible through testimony of which Hills has argued it cannot be. This is because ‘knowledge how’ or abilities cannot be transmitted through testimony because they can only be learned in the act of doing it oneself.

One could be told how to do something, but they will not truly know how without trying themselves. But as with many abilities, you will not always or even typically acquire these abilities through testimony. Instead, you have to practice. Most people cannot learn to ride a bike, to perform brain surgery, or to type at 100 words a minute by listening to someone describe how to do so, or reading even an exceptionally good textbook...Most people cannot learn to make correct moral judgments by listening to those who are good at making judgments describe what they do (Hills, 2009, pp. 119-120).

I do not have space here to properly prove that understanding cannot be transmitted through testimony, but whether we believe it to be or not is going to hinge upon how teachable or learnable we take moral deliberation to be¹⁶. In “Can Testimony Transmit Understanding” (2020), Federica Malfatti argues that know-how can be transmitted through testimony using the example of getting a recipe from a friend. When one follows the directions, one now knows how to make a particular dish. Is gaining the ability for better moral deliberation something that can be learned by following a list that they are given or is it something one must ultimately do themselves like riding a bike? I am inclined towards the latter as developing an ability to determine the salient features of a moral circumstance, the moral status of an action, or the moral reasons behind the moral status are not going to be the kind of thing one can come to understand by being told by another. I take the view of another proponent of understanding not being transmitted through testimony: “Understanding cannot be given to another person at all except in

¹⁶ For more regarding this debate see (Boyd, 2017) and (Malfatti, 2020).

the indirect sense that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in hopes that the student will acquire it also” (Zagzebski, 2008, pp.145-146). I do not take moral experts to be completely useless, and I will be elaborating later how they still hold value for fostering better moral deliberation despite the lower status my theory relegates them to.

It is important to note that Hills takes understanding to be factive. This is to say that one cannot have understanding about something that is false or not true. Postulating these truth values is simply to say that they are true according to the correspondence theory of truth, namely that one has understanding about facts that correspond to an external world apart from what anyone may think about it. This seems generally intuitive as it seems strange to say one understands something, at least in the way Hills means it, that is just not true. This may bring forth concerns about which moral theory is true or which theory we should commit ourselves to, but I think we need not commit to a particular moral theory here. There are truths about morality, but to think that any one theory completely covers the extent of all moral truth and that we have happened to determine the theory that covers all of them is unlikely. So, we should just be concerned here with what is true about morality generally, not which theories are correct or true. This also further gets at why understanding is not transparent, that we do not have understanding simply because we feel we do or because it satisfied the theory we subscribe to.

A final consideration about understanding is that it comes in degrees. One can be said to understand more than another about a particular object of thought. One may also cultivate understanding about morality generally, morality about a specific type of moral dilemma; say understanding about morality regarding the environment and lastly understanding about a specific instance. This may bring forward a concern that if there are good moral reasons for developing understanding, how much understanding must one develop to be said they are

properly cultivating understanding? Like Hills, I will not be answering that there is a particular amount that is necessary as the amount is going to differ by context¹⁷. I think there are generally going to be good moral reasons for obtaining more understanding as opposed to less as having more understanding about morality generally will allow you to more reliably act correctly in more instances.

For now, all that has been provided is what moral understanding would constitute, but what reasons do we have to think cultivating or developing moral understanding to be something of moral relevance? I will be answering this in the following section, however, there is a second important question I must answer which is what is the moral strength with which my claims against deferral are being made? What I mean by this is the moral status of the act of deferring or not. For example, one could say doing so is simply morally good or bad. Which does not really get at other considerations of other good and bad moral criterion necessary to determine what we should do but is simply a moral evaluation or observance. One could also claim that this action is morally permissible, such that doing so is not morally required/forbidden, but may be supererogatory, i.e. a good thing to do, but not wrong if you do not. Another claim in this same vein would be that the act or the way the act was done would constitute something that is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy. This is to say that the action has a commendable or condemnable quality but does not ultimately say we are required to do it. Stronger claims will constitute statements about moral obligation, namely statements that include things such as the claim that one ‘should,’ or ‘ought’ to do one of these two actions. This still seems to imply that one is saying there are morally relevant features that one thinks push one towards one action over the

¹⁷ Alternatively, there might be a cutoff point before which you do not count as having moral understanding, after which you do. This cutoff point might be contextually determined; that is, in one context you might need i–vi to only a minimal degree to count as having moral understanding, a different context might have higher standards, so that you needed to have i–vi to a greater extent to have moral understanding (Hills, 2009, p. 103).

other, but seems to be more of moral advice rather than a moral command. Finally, the strongest claims are going to constitute moral requirements where one makes statements that the action is ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ one ‘must’ do so, or there is a moral principle that is so basic that any violation of it makes the action wrong.

Returning to my remarks about the strength of Enoch’s claims in section 2.4, I do not think an optimist can justify a requirement that one must defer in the majority of cases or else one has acted wrongly. Oppositely, I think a pessimistic claim that one must not defer in the majority of cases or one has acted wrongly, is equally too strong. To answer the first question, I will be making a weaker claim along the lines that there are moral reasons one should or ought to consider my pessimistic argument when determining whether one should defer or not. I will have much more to say about this in the following section. My argument will rely upon the claim that there is a moral requirement to learn how to deliberate on moral matter for oneself¹⁸, but there is not a requirement regarding how we do this. This gives us good reason to think that moral understanding is one of the good ways to gain the abilities necessary to deliberate ourselves. First, I should justify why I think there is a requirement to learn how to deliberate ourselves. To do so, we should return to the asymmetry problem.

To remind my readers, the asymmetry problem regards a comparison between non-moral and moral experts and whether there is any morally relevant difference between the two when it comes to our deferral to them. If there are no morally relevant differences and deferral to non-moral experts is morally acceptable, then deferral to moral experts would be similarly morally acceptable. The morally relevant difference I am proposing is the very fact that deferral to moral

¹⁸ This is distinct from a requirement *to* deliberate on moral matters for oneself. If one knew how to deliberate themselves then they would not need to defer so they could defer if they already know how, as they do not need to learn, but if one knows how then one has no reason to defer in the first place.

experts deals with morality whereas non-moral expertise does not. Firstly, morality is more important than non-moral concerns and is not the kind of thing one can opt out of. This is referred to as the optionality difference: “We accept that one cannot opt out of moral agency in the way that one can opt out of surgical agency or physicist agency. We are thrust into the role of being moral agents in a way that we are not thrust into the roles of being surgeons and physicists” (Groll & Decker, 2014, p. 10). There is no imperative or prescription to be a doctor or a lawyer, but one simply is a moral agent if they have certain faculties, and certain prescriptions follow from this agency. I am proposing here that morality is other regarding, categorical, and prescriptive whereas non-moral considerations are not. This is to say that morality places us in obligations to others that we cannot opt out of, holds regardless of what we would prefer as it has to do with facts about the external world, and is about what we ought to do regarding goodness such that morality has normative force. One of the most basic thought experiments regarding morality: Singer’s Drowning Child (2017) bears this out. The obligation to save the child is more important than any hypothetical end we have. Being right or good gives us a reason to pursue said action, above simply desiring we be moral ourselves¹⁹. In our case when considering deferral, our agent in the example already has a desire to satisfy the ends of morality as the justification for deferral is that doing so would help us be more moral, not that it satisfies other non-moral hypothetical ends. One only has reason to defer to non-moral experts insofar as it satisfies one’s hypothetical ends, but not for any further or more important reason like morality.

¹⁹ This commits me to internalism about reasons regarding morality. However, I am not an internalist about motivation regarding morality. There is also a problem regarding altruism here if I claim that something being right is a good reason to do it. Simply because a self-interested motive can always be presented does not mean that this is the motive. We feel inclined to save the child not from any self-interested motive. We just feel pulled to act, although we are also pulled by our desire for material goods.

Secondly, there are moral requirements that hold regarding our epistemology when it regards morality that do not when dealing with non-moral concerns. Essentially, I think that there is a requirement to learn for myself how to properly morally deliberate, whereas there is no such requirement for deferral to non-moral experts. Let us also return to our examples at the beginning regarding car mechanics, doctors, or lawyers. In deferring to them one offloads both work and time they otherwise would have to do for themselves without really sacrificing anything of importance outside of one's hypothetical goals. What reason do I have to learn how to treat myself medically, fix my car myself, or represent myself in court? I can achieve my goal by relying upon the expertise of others without having to learn how to do it myself. However, if one has a goal of being a good moral agent or acting morally well, one most likely cannot achieve this goal without learning how to do so by oneself. This is referred to as the scope difference: “when it comes to non-moral roles, it is often perfectly possible for someone to fulfill the role--and even fulfill it well—while still accepting a great deal on the basis of testimony. But, the objection goes, the same is not true for the moral realm, where the reliance on testimony always militates against one's adequately fulfilling the role of moral agent” (Groll & Decker, 2014, pp. 15-16)²⁰. So, what do we lose when we defer to moral experts? An opportunity to practice moral deliberation and moral action ourselves, in the heat of the moment with the proper motivation²¹ to develop our moral epistemology. I will be proposing a final argument from a *reductio ad absurdum* in the next section to show why one must develop certain epistemic abilities. First, I must address a few more concerns regarding what epistemic abilities I am referring to and secondly, what cases this will or will not apply to.

²⁰ Groll and Decker propose arguments against the scope difference and the optionality difference, that I do not have space to explicate and refute here. More concerning this can be found in (Groll & Decker, 2014).

²¹ I will have more to say regarding motivation in Chapter 3.

2.6. Normative Justifications for Moral Understanding

The first justification for moral understanding is the argument for reliably doing right, which is very similar to the argument I presented earlier regarding increasing our likelihood of minimizing the risk of wrongdoing over time. There are going to be times when we do not have access to a moral expert for whatever reason or we do not have the time for them to explain everything that would be necessary for us to have understanding, if that is even possible, such that we would need to judge for ourselves. “While in principle, your moral instincts might be infallible so that you always instinctively choose the morally right action or you might keep your moral guru by your side at all times to advise you, in practice, neither of these is likely to happen” (Hills, 2009, p. 106). I illustrated above the instrumental value of moral understanding, so I will not belabor the point here. If one knows that something is morally wrong, why it is morally wrong, and understands why it is morally wrong they will be able to identify morally salient features of similar circumstances such that they may act correctly when they do not have access to a moral expert. For this reason, one ought to develop moral understanding under any moral framework as reliably doing right is such a basic moral principle.

However, let us consider some possible problems that might arise. Say we think that not deferring is not going to make us act correctly more reliably, or that more moral understanding can be transmitted via testimony than Hills would contend. Let us return to the problem of identifying moral experts and Enoch’s example of recognizing Alon as a moral expert. I did not state what moral epistemology we need to hold, but clearly, we need to hold one. The philosophical move I am going to make right here is quite simple. The decision of whether to defer to a moral expert or not has itself become a first order moral dilemma that, while connected to the moral dilemma we are asking the moral expert about in the first place, can be talked about

separate from the particulars of that dilemma. This is a moral dilemma that itself cannot be offloaded to a moral expert because the decision is about whether we should defer to a moral expert. Were one to defer to another moral expert about whether one should defer to this moral expert would result in an infinite regression of deferral to moral experts. Therefore, one necessarily has to determine one's action, in deciding on deferral, oneself. This is again distinct from an autonomy argument because it is a claim that, in this circumstance, one has no choice but to act autonomously rather than a statement that one is required to do so morally.

To make this determination one would need to have basic epistemic abilities regarding morality to make the right decision. The difficulty with taking a weak position, rather than a strong position, is that I can be presented with any number of cases where I would have to determine whether this is or is not a case where one should not defer. I find this to be the most challenging aspect of this thesis. There is something antithetical to one accepting a claim that one ought or should not defer to moral experts on my possible standing as a moral expert. While my arguments are supposed to stand on their own, making such a forceful claim while also saying one should think for oneself seems problematic as one should think for oneself regarding my arguments as well. While it seems like a cop out, you, my audience need to consider the morally relevant features of making the decision to defer or not in individual cases yourselves. My goal in this project has been to put an onus on considering what one might lose epistemically in deferring to moral experts and that there is something morally less ideal with opting for that epistemic loss. I think, as Enoch points out, that the other morally relevant consideration is the egregiousness of the wrongs that may occur if we are incorrect. In some low stake cases, the value of practice to our moral epistemology may outweigh getting it wrong. In others, the reverse may be true, and it would be better if we squandered the opportunity for moral growth for higher

certainty about our actions. To evaluate a moral expert effectively oneself, at least in Enoch's case, one would have to have a strong enough grasp of some base epistemic abilities to recognize them as more reliable than oneself. Not only this, but one would need to have enough understanding about morality to determine the egregiousness of possible wrongs.

The question arises as to what epistemic abilities would be required to not only effectively consider the moral implications of deferral, but to be a good moral agent generally? If we accept the propositions from section 1.2 that morality is indexed to something, one can make better or worse claims regarding morality, and that morality can be known, then there is a set of the most basic moral abilities that build upon each other. The first ability is to differentiate morally relevant features in a circumstance from non-morally relevant features. A morally relevant feature would be something like suffering where a non-morally relevant feature would perhaps be something like distance from the individual. I.e. the fact that someone is far away from you doesn't have anything to do with what you ought to do about their suffering. Once one can do this, then one can begin recognizing whether features of a circumstance are good or bad, essentially abilities of evaluation. One can then begin to determine whether actions are right or wrong according to the good and bad qualities of the action and its potential results. Upon recognizing that certain actions are generally right or generally result in good, one develops moral rules to follow. One cannot just follow moral rules absolutely but must learn how to apply them to circumstances. Lastly, one must evaluate the application of a moral rule against other possibly conflicting moral rules. This nonexhaustive list of extremely basic epistemic abilities regarding morality, and the requirement to foster them, is a reason to consider not deferring to moral experts as I am claiming that engaging in moral deliberation oneself is essential for moral understanding which helps one develop these epistemic abilities, at least more so than deferral.

My readers may be confused as to how this is a moral argument as opposed to an epistemic one as the two run quite closely together with epistemic abilities and moral understanding being epistemic concepts at bottom. To see the distinction between the two, one can look at the remarks from Hopkins cited in section 1.5 as well as my remarks at the beginning of the chapter. The distinction is essentially regarding the justification for our action according to the prescription of either morality or epistemology. To reiterate, “the case for taking moral testimony can be evaluated along at least two different dimensions. Along, the first dimension there is the epistemological standing of the testimonial source, and the grasp of that standing by the person relying on moral testimony” (Lillehammer, 2014, p. 118). This is either the failure of testimony as a source of knowledge Hopkins was referring to, or the arguments we saw from Wang in section 1.6. Both arguments are claiming that according to the dictates of epistemology we either ought to defer or not due to the requirements of epistemic norms, such as closure and consistency. “Along the second dimension there is the moral standing of the testimonial source, and the grasp of that standing by the person relying on moral testimony” (Lillehammer, 2014, p. 118). The former here are the arguments cited in section 2.2 by Kant and Anscombe, that it is morally wrong to defer to the testimony of moral experts for reasons of autonomy. In the words of Lillehammer referring to his own argument, “some arguments against moral testimony contain at least one moral premise. To that extent, they are moral arguments. They should therefore be evaluated partly on their moral merits” (Lillehammer, 2014, p. 113). My moral premise is that for moral reasons we ought to develop certain epistemic abilities, and we do so by deliberating ourselves rather than deferring. The claim that morality impinges on our epistemology, or that moral requirements affect our epistemic requirements is not foreign to philosophy. Sarah Moss (2018) proposed the idea of “moral encroachment,” that “The epistemic status of an opinion can

depend on its moral features” (p. 179). While I am not making this strong of a claim, I am making a claim, as mentioned before, like that of William Clifford, that there is something morally good with having a certain moral epistemology and something morally wrong with failing to foster said epistemology, and this is justified on moral grounds rather than a prescription on epistemic grounds.

Before I close out this project, I will be considering three critiques about moral understanding: 1) concerns about the accessibility of moral understanding, 2) worries that the moral reasons I have provided are not prescriptive enough to really say that we ought to not defer, and 3) the arising of a possible false dichotomy between deferring and deliberating ourselves viz. We could not defer and then deliberate by ourselves after the fact. The section before the conclusion will act as an explication of how I think moral experts may still be beneficial in our moral deliberation even though I think there are good reasons not to defer to them.

Chapter 3: A Consideration of Remaining Critiques and the Value of Moral Expertise

Now that I have properly explained and set up the issue in chapter one and have provided my view in chapter two, I must consider some of the intuitive critiques that might arise to my position. Like any good work in philosophy, I cannot just provide positive reasons for why my view is correct but must also defend the view against reasons why it may fail. If my argument comes out unscathed such that we have reason not to defer to moral experts, then it leaves open the question as to what use, if any, moral experts and their expertise can have for the moral agent as layperson. I will not be concluding that moral expertise should simply be ignored or viewed to always be false, but to propose that there are ways that we can incorporate the ideas and proposals of moral experts into our deliberations as advice that we concur upon in a non-deferential manner. This chapter will also serve as a conclusion to the project generally.

3.1. Critique One: Inaccessibility of Moral Understanding

A possible rebuttal that can be put forward is that one should defer if one is in a case where they cannot cultivate moral understanding. This is important because if it is put forward that one has moral reasons to cultivate moral understanding, then one must be able to do so. Ought implies can. This idea is put forward by Enoch,

The ideal scenario for me would be to achieve moral understanding and make an autonomous choice to vote against the war. But this is the wrong comparison. When I am deliberating whether to vote for or against funding the war, and indeed whether to defer to Alon, I can perhaps hope to have more by way of moral understanding. But this is not an option available to me right now. The relevant options available to me are either to defer or to think for myself... Though it would be nice if I had a third—acting rightly and

also autonomously and from moral understanding—this is not possible for me now except by paying a price in a greater chance of wronging people (Enoch, 2014, p. 247).

I think there are two ways that we can take this critique: 1) a claim that understanding is literally not accessible to an individual, for whatever reason, or 2) that understanding is possible, but not without losing something of greater moral value. The first is a claim that one *cannot* understand and would therefore be justified in deferring. The second does not claim that gaining understanding is impossible, but that doing so is less than ideal. This second claim is what I have attempted to argue against in sections 2.3 and 2.4, so let us consider the first claim that we should defer when understanding is not available. We might notice that Enoch uses the word ‘now’ in referring to accessibility of moral understanding, thus implying that moral understanding could be gained later. This will constitute the third critique that I will be engaging with in section 3.3.

In response to the first claim about literal inaccessibility, I would concur that if it were not possible for one to even develop moral understanding, let alone actually possess it, one should defer to moral experts. However, I would like to put some scrutiny on this claim and when it would apply. Let us ask what reason we would have to think that we do not have the ability to cultivate moral understanding? I think I will need to concede a claim that the ability to have moral understanding is an egalitarian notion. I think that anyone that is a moral agent has the ability to cultivate moral understanding, but this does not mean that this faculty is expressed to the same extent amongst all moral agents. If my readers agree with this claim that anyone who is a moral agent can develop moral understanding, then the burden of proof is placed on showing why cultivating moral understanding is not possible. To show why I think this claim is the case we can look at possible candidates for states of affairs that would make it such that one could not

understand. These will be things like not having the proper epistemic or cognitive capacities to have the abilities of cognitive control put forward by Hills. Another would be things like not having the ability to recognize right and wrong, recognize moral reasons, or maybe even to morally deliberate at all. What exactly constitutes a proper set of faculties for moral reasoning is quite contentious within philosophy, but I think it is likely some combination of emotive and reasoning faculties as seen in Kant's (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and Hume's (1739/1888) *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Other possible reasons for an inability to develop understanding seem to be pragmatic, such as one not having the time, energy, resources, money, etc to develop their epistemic abilities. These are not claims that one *literally cannot* understand, but that it is difficult for one to do so. It seems to me that under these states of affairs one is still a moral agent, and I have claimed that moral agents are morally obligated to develop their epistemic abilities regarding morality, so these would not constitute excuses for deferral.

Notice, however, that cognitive capacities and abilities of moral deliberation are the kinds of things that determine whether one is a moral agent to begin with. It is conceded by Hills and I that it is perfectly reasonable for an individual who *cannot* cultivate moral understanding, so a moral patient rather than agent, to defer. "Most young children are immature moral agents, which is why it is perfectly in order for them to trust moral testimony and defer to the judgements of the adults around them. In fact, it is likely to be impossible—or at least exceptionally difficult—for them to gain moral understanding unless they begin by forming beliefs in this way" (Hills, 2009, p. 120). There may be some reasons I have not considered for why one may have difficulty understanding that could outweigh reasons not to defer and I am willing to consider possible reasons from my interlocutor for why an adult moral agent with the proper cognitive and moral capacities literally could not cultivate moral understanding.

However, if these faculties are in place I do not see any further reason why one just cannot understand.

Although, another problem may arise in considering a case where someone has the ability to gain moral understanding, does not defer to do so, and for whatever external reason fails to gain moral understanding. This could undermine my argument that not deferring helps us more reliably act correctly in the future, in that in failing to understand we will also fail to extrapolate to other similar circumstances in the future such that we are not more likely to be correct in the future. While I propose that moral understanding is one way in which we can develop the epistemic abilities that are required of us, I did not make a moral prescription that we must gain or act from moral understanding. There are other ways in which an individual could gain these abilities, maybe purposefully exposing themselves to moral phenomena, engaging with art, reading moral theory texts, etc. I think my remarks in section 3.3 will help with this critique, but for now I think it is worth pointing out that for this argument to work one must hold the claim that one is just as worse off in terms of future moral action in deliberating and failing as they would be if they deferred and did not deliberate at all. I do not think this is the case.

Even in the non-moral realm regarding any industry that requires development and skill, failure is part of the learning process. I think in attempting and failing one has still moved forward in the enterprise of developing moral understanding at least insofar as one has learned that what they are currently doing is not working. In trying and failing, one is still more likely to get it right in the future than if they offload their deliberation and do not practice at all. I may have to stipulate that engaging in moral deliberation itself makes one better at moral deliberation, which may seem like bootstrapping, but every activity seems to be of this nature. One does not get worse at studying through studying or worse at skiing by skiing. One does not get worse at

moral deliberation by engaging in moral deliberation. Moreover, if we take it to be the case that understanding cannot be transferred through testimony, or at least some of it cannot, then there would not be any other way to achieve it than by oneself. If we defer there is no chance we will understand, but if we do not, there is a chance we will. Secondly, if the failure to understand is due to some external circumstances rather than a lack of ability then this is just bad luck and the fact the one might fail in an enterprise is no reason to not engage in it. We might ask whether we could defer and then deliberate after the fact, such that we could be more likely to be right in this circumstance and develop moral understanding for future circumstances? This is the critique I will be considering in 3.3.

3.2. Critique Two: A Weakness in Moral Prescription

The second critique I must address is that I have not made a prescription that we are morally required to not defer to moral experts or that we have done something morally wrong in deferring to them. However, I have proposed a moral prescription that we are required to develop the basic epistemic abilities necessary for a basic moral epistemology because one is a moral agent and has certain responsibilities that come along with that. This is to provide a moral reason to sometimes not defer in that doing so hinders our development of these epistemic abilities in that it offloads a need to deliberate ourselves. I have provided arguments for why deliberating ourselves is instrumentally beneficial for future moral deliberation where access to moral expertise is not available in that it fosters moral understanding which in turn builds our epistemic abilities. A question comes forward as to why we ought to do something, in this case not deferring to moral experts, if it is not morally required even though we have a reason not to do so?

The easiest way to subvert this critique would be to concede that there is more to morality than merely, or always, doing the right thing and satisfying moral requirements. On my view, 1) moral reasons need not be wholly prescriptive for us to have reason to do them and 2) that there is a distinction between morally worthy action, or acting well, and right action. Regarding the former, we can consider what are often called supererogatory actions, these being actions that are not morally required of us, but nonetheless would still be morally praiseworthy or good to do. This is what I mean by not wholly prescriptive; we ought to do it insofar as we ought to do good things, but we are not ultimately morally required to do so as it is not an expectation or requirement of morality. We have not done wrong in failing to do the action. “Supererogation lies at the intersection of the axiological and the deontic, the ‘good’ and the ‘ought’ (Heyd, 2024). I mean the term axiological here in terms of value judgements. For something to be an axiological claim in ethics is to say that an action or circumstance is morally good or bad in some sense. While the deontic is tied to the axiological in the partially prescriptive sense shown above, some thing’s being morally good does not necessarily give us a duty to bring it about. “Moral requirements are relatively fixed and well defined, having clear criteria of fulfillment and violation. Consequently, the deontic sphere of morality is often taken as describing the *minimal* conditions of morality...while the axiological sphere aims at higher ideals which can only be commended and recommended but not strictly required” (Heyd, 2024). An example of a supererogatory act would be giving one’s life, in an act of heroism, to help others. While there might be a basic moral obligation that we must help those in need, when we can do so, without the sacrifice of something of equal moral importance, there cannot be a requirement that we forfeit our life to do so. Yet we still think the act of giving one's life for a higher cause to be good in some respect or that the individual must have moral reasons for doing so. My claim that one

has moral reasons not to defer is an axiological claim, whereas my claim that one must develop basic epistemic abilities is a deontic one. One can still have reasons to act on axiological claims when they are not required to or if doing so furthers deontic requirements. We may have reason to develop moral understanding, even if it is not morally required we do so, insofar as it is instrumentally valuable to the deontic requirement to develop epistemic abilities or insofar as it is a good thing to do, even if not obligatory.

Secondly, regarding the latter, viz. The distinction between morally worthy action and right action, I can concede that how and why we engage in moral action matters morally in some sense, such that there is more to morality than just right action. I am referring here to the fact that we can do the right moral action, but for the wrong moral reasons. For an action to be morally worthy is for one to have the right intentions and having the right intentions is to do the action for the right reason. For example, it might be morally right to donate to charity, but one can do so for a myriad of reasons: to look better in the eyes of others, to feel good about oneself, for a tax write-off, or because it is the right thing to do. The latter seems to be the right reason for donating to charity and any other reason is a worse one morally. This conception that morally worthy action is better than simply right action and doing the right action for the right reasons matters, is quite intuitive and holds under deontic and virtue ethic systems. It does not seem to hold under utilitarian systems where doing the right thing, insofar as it maximizes utility, is all that matters. If one subscribes to a utilitarian theory, then refer to my arguments for reliably doing right against deferral in section 2.6.

A possible problem that may arise regarding my points above about the traditional moral theories is that it is unclear how intentionality manifests itself in the world in a causal manner such that it has any instrumental value for morality. Essentially, if intentionality does not actually

change any outcomes, why would it matter morally? How would the reasons we do or do not do actions matter? If intentionality is what makes an action morally worthy but intentionality does not actually matter, then the distinction I am trying to make from simple right action to morally worthy action dissolves. Under Deontic and virtue ethic systems intentionality is baked into the morality itself such that it is what makes something right or wrong, and these theories rely upon intentions having an intrinsic value. In chapter two I avoided making arguments from intrinsic value for this very reason because it requires certain moral theories, that give an intrinsic value to intentions, to be true. While it may be difficult to show how intentionality can have instrumental value, this does not mean it is impossible to do so. This is a quite difficult and robust topic that would require much more space and work to definitively show, but if I can show intentionality, as the source of morally worthy action, has any instrumental value for morality, then it will be beneficial under any moral theory.

One way that we could begin to consider how acting for the right reasons could have instrumental value is that intentionality affects how individuals behave. If how one thinks about morality and motivates oneself towards morality changes how one acts morally then it would matter in an instrumental sense. While one could have the right intentions and do the wrong act as well as do the right act with the wrong intentions, is it not more likely that having the right intentions makes it more likely you will do the right action? If I truly want to do what is right and am looking for ways to do so, it seems more likely I will fall upon the right action than an individual who has no such intention. This latter individual would only do the right action by chance or insofar as the actions that satisfy their other goals happen to also be what is morally right. Furthermore, my intention to do what is right may do battle against my other intentions where there is no such defense for the individual with no intention of doing good.

Secondly, intentionality affects how others interact and treat each other. If individuals generally have good intentions, then we can engage in trust and cooperation in forming moral norms. If we know one to have bad intentions, then we may not trust them, give them less respect, or even treat them worse than we ought insofar as we think they would do the same for us. In addition, the importance of intentionality seems to manifest itself in our legal system in ways that don't seem to rely upon it having an intrinsic value. We take the concept of *mens rea*, or guilty mind, to be central in determining punishment which surely should be instrumentally valuable to society. Lastly, having proper intentions can have an effect on moral cultivation. This is the idea that if one has the intention to do good one will be more likely to reflect and as a result will lead to wiser action in the future which leads to better outcomes. While each of these reasons could be explored much further, these ideas may elicit an intuition in my readers that intentionality can have some instrumental value for morality. Moreover, I am not completely opposed to the idea that morally worthy action could have intrinsic value. I just currently lack the ability to properly explain exactly how this could be the case.

To reiterate, the critique here is that we might not have reason to not defer if it is not wholly prescriptive or morally required that we do so. If the distinction between morally worthy action and right action holds and morally worthy action is worth pursuing instrumentally and what makes an action morally worthy is to do the right act for the reasons that make your action right, then we have a reason not to defer and to gain moral understanding. If having moral understanding is to appreciate the reasons why something is right or wrong and the ability to grasp the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true, then it seems moral understanding would be necessary for morally worthy action. Furthermore, deferring is to act from reasons of testimony rather than from morally relevant reasons.

We can return here to Enoch's remarks, I mentioned in section 2.4. that "the value of moral understanding never by itself gives us a non-instrumental reason to act in a way that tolerates a greater risk of injustice or of acting immorally" (Enoch, 2014, p. 249). I have tried to show with my arguments in chapter 2 that moral understanding does have instrumental value and that this value can push us towards not deferring rather than deferring. Enoch's contention is that even if moral understanding has intrinsic value, this value will not accept taking a higher risk of acting wrongly. I also contest this claim. Some remarks from Enoch can help better see the contention, "Notice that my point is not best understood in terms of the strength or the weight of the relevant reasons, rather it is best understood in terms of the nature of the relevant value, and so the nature of the actions for which it (non-instrumentally) provides reason" (Enoch, 2014, p. 249). He shows this by proposing an analogical argument between developing compassion through causing suffering and developing moral understanding and risking wrongdoing. He argues that there is an internal inconsistency between compassion and causing suffering and moral understanding and risking wrongdoing. "Is it ever permissible (or even virtuous, or morally worthy) to act in a way that is likely to increase human suffering in order to secure opportunity for bettering ourselves in terms of compassion" (Enoch, 2014, p. 248)? The analogous question for moral understanding would be is it ever permissible (or even virtuous, or morally worthy) to act in a way that is likely to increase the risk of wrongdoing in order to secure opportunity for bettering ourselves in terms of compassion? The presumed answer to both, if the analogy works, is no, but also presumably this depends upon what moral theory and meta ethic we are writing from, of which neither I nor Enoch have stipulated particular ones. I think this is where some of the contention between us lies, that by how he argues against intentions, autonomy, and moral understanding of being of value such that one could risk worse outcomes

seems to imply he devalues intrinsic value to instrumental value and the value of outcomes to non-outcome evaluation. “Moral understanding is not the kind of value that can recommend accepting a greater risk of acting immorally...someone willing to tolerate a greater risk of acting impermissibly merely in order to work on here moral understanding, that is, independently of the supposed instrumental payoff, is acting wrongly” (Enoch, 2014, p.249). I think that it is sometimes worth it to risk getting things wrong to develop intrinsic values, and he does not. Much more could be said about this, but this goes beyond the scope of my thesis. This is why I have opted rather to show from my arguments in chapter two that 1) one is not acting wrongly in doing so and 2) focusing on the instrumental value of moral understanding. It is also unclear why intrinsic and instrumental values need to be considered independently and not in tandem.

3.3. Critique Three: A Recourse in the Event of a Failure Within My Arguments

Let us consider everything I have argued for at this point and consider a further possible reason why opting to not defer may be better than deferring. Let us say that moral understanding can be transmitted through testimony, that my *reductio* fails, there is no asymmetry between moral and non- moral expertise, and that there may be other ways that one can gain the epistemic abilities necessary of a moral agent while still deferring. This constitutes the last critique that I will be considering here namely that we may concede that deferring does not result in moral understanding, but the question that arises in the logical space is does opposingly not deferring result in moral understanding?

One should look at the difference between deferring to a moral expert and not deferring to a moral expert. Obviously, not deferring to a moral expert does not grant the agent moral understanding or virtue. If moral understanding and virtue were to be absent whether you defer to the expert or not, then how important they are would not be

relevant. Thus, Hills' argument might successfully show that deferring to moral experts is problematic if one does so without understanding/virtue, but they nevertheless fail to show that the alternative—not deferring to moral experts—is the better option. They are confusing a policy of “defer and never reflect” with a policy of “defer and then think of things as you usually would” (Wang, 2023, p. 602).²²

This critique by Wang, presented in the last sentence above, shows Hills' argument to be a false dichotomy as it assumes that if one defers one will not deliberate after the fact to develop understanding. Could one not defer to the expert and do what they say without reflecting before doing the act, but then reflect upon it after the fact? Hills' argument proposes when one defers, they do not reflect, and when they do not defer, they do reflect. The problem is there are four options: Defer and never reflect, Defer and reflect, Not defer and reflect, or Not defer and never reflect. Let us take however minimally, that reflecting on moral matters oneself has some instrumental value. If we do, then this returns our options to two: defer and reflect or not defer and reflect. So, what reason might we have to choose the latter as opposed to the former?

We can rely here on an analogical argument made by Laura Callahan for what she calls ‘a new and improved pessimism’ (Callahan, 2025). She calls her view an improvement because Hill's arguments rely too heavily on testimony being insufficient for understanding across the board, or at the very least for moral understanding. This is because Hills' relies upon the inability to transfer abilities and ‘know-how’ through testimony and that ‘know-how’ is not propositional knowledge.²³ “Sufficiency Pessimism (Callahan's term for Hills' pessimist view) makes dubious

²² A problem with this critique is that Hills does not argue that deferring to moral experts without understanding is wrong, but that deferring is wrong because it does not result in moral understanding. If one already had moral understanding, the issue becomes moot because one would not need to defer as one can just act on one's moral understanding.

²³ See section 2.5 above.

claims about what testimony cannot do, or cannot typically do, or cannot-do-when-it-comes-to-some-domains" (Callahan, 2025, p. 6). I, as well as Callahan, think that these critiques are not a smoking gun for a pessimistic theory that uses moral understanding as a non-deferential justification, such that they could not be overcome.

She argues these critiques can be defeated if we update Hills' argument to what she calls 'Incentive Pessimism'. This view claims that 1) "we often have reason not to defer to testimony in settling questions in domains where understanding is important; and 2) this is because testimony has the general capacity to disincentivize understanding—by giving us some of what's valuable about understanding without reducing the work required to achieve understanding—and hence discourage its acquisition" (Callahan, 2025, p. 10). The argument goes that when regarding the two options to defer and reflect or to not defer and reflect, the former disincentivizes us from reflecting. This ultimately has to do with moral motivation, which I think is more important than ethicists have granted, as we could satisfy all the hypothetical requirements of morality and still fail to act because we do not care to or see any pressing reason to. Let me briefly explain why Callahan thinks this is the case.

To show exactly how disincentives work, Callahan proposes an example where one is offered an upfront payment for digging a large hole with some payment given upon completing the digging of the hole. "Suppose I offer you \$200 for digging a large hole tomorrow. You consider this offer, and since you only value the time and effort it would take you to dig the hole at around \$125, you think this is a good deal. Then I add, 'I'll even give you \$50 of that payment today, up front, regardless of whether you do the digging'" (Callahan, 2025, p. 695). The question here is whether one should take the 50 dollars up front or not? Similarly to the four options regarding deferral above, one has four options here. 1) take the \$50 and don't dig, 2) take

the \$50 and dig for a further \$150, 3) refuse the \$50 and don't dig, and 4) refuse the \$50 and dig for \$200. Callahan creates an equation to determine the option one should pick to be when the value of the full goal (FG) minus the value of the disincentive (D) is greater than the value of the cost to attain the full goal, thus offsetting it.²⁴ The values for the four options are as follows: \$50, \$75, \$0, and \$75, so ultimately we should take options 2 or 4. Rather than get bogged down in the math and the particulars of the example, let me explain how these variables analogize to the instance of deference we have been dealing with.

The full goal is what I showed Enoch referring to in section 3.1: acting correctly and gaining moral understanding which is analogous to the full \$200 dollars. The \$50 offer in this example is analogous to the value we get from deferring, as we can defer and gain some moral value without having to do any epistemic labor. The \$125 cost of digging the whole is analogous to the time and energy that would be required to reflect upon the moral circumstance for yourself regardless of whether you defer or not. The two options we are left with are analogous to the options of deferring and reflecting and not deferring and reflecting. At first glance it seems that either option will result in the same value, so what reason would we have to pick the latter?

Callahan argues that taking the \$50 up front makes us re-evaluate the value of engaging in the full goal. While I could dig the hole and gain an extra \$25 dollars, I have just gained \$50 from doing nothing, so I will only engage in what I constitute to be \$125 of work if I really care about the additional \$25. From a game theoretic perspective, the rational choice would be to make \$75. The argument according to Callahan is that taking the \$50 disincentivizes us from doing the rest of the work, even though it would be in our interest to do so, because we may simply be lazy. If we take the \$50 up front, it is more likely we will forego and lose the

²⁴ The full equation in question is $(V(FG)-V(D))>V(C_{fg})$ (Callahan, 2025).

additional \$25 profit. Analogously, one could say that one could defer and reflect after the fact, but the question is how likely this is to occur as compared to if one simply refuses the \$50 or refuses to defer? This makes the moral decision a matter of willpower and motivation.

A direct response to this is that one could think that they will simply steel themselves from the disincentive and motivate themselves to dig the hole regardless. “Perhaps you know, of yourself, that you are not terribly vulnerable to weakness of the will...that would prevent our digging tomorrow” (Callahan, 2025, p. 11). At this point it becomes a question of how strong one takes their will to be, and this is how one should determine their action. While this is something one could do, would it not be a better idea to avoid the risk by refusing the disincentive all together? Human willpower is commonly fickle, and akrasia abounds in human decision making. If one avoids the incentive of deferral, they don’t have to consider the question of the weakness of their will at all. If one defers and acts on the moral experts testimony then the moral quandary has passed and one maybe knows whether the action was right or wrong post facto, and while one might think one has reason to reflect to prepare for future moral quandaries they may now be unmotivated to do so as they may also think there is no point in reflecting if the expert got it right, and nothing they can do about it if they got it wrong. It is a lot of work for little reward. Therefore, one should not defer to maintain their motivation for reflection.

Notice that this maps well onto deferral to non-moral expertise if there is a symmetry with moral expertise. There may also be times when learning for myself would be valuable, but I have little motivation to do so because I can just rely on the expert. There are other everyday examples where we might think this way about avoiding disincentives. Take artificial intelligence as an example of something that can provide massive amount of value to oneself in an extremely little amount of time. What motivation does one have to think, create, learn, or

research for oneself when one can offload those activities to AI? One may start by thinking I should not use AI to write my paper, but I can use it to clean up my grammar or to come up with a critique of my argument. While it might seem like a slippery slope, this can rather quickly lead to thoughts about using AI to just write the whole paper, thus undermining the purposes of writing the paper to begin with: learning. This may be a reason to refuse to use AI for certain things on principle. My point here is that “it can be prudent to avoid partial immediate gratification of a desire if you want to steel your will to pursue the full goal” (Callahan, 2025, p. 11). “The incentive pessimist can say that seeking to settle one’s questions via testimony in a domain where understanding is important often discourages one from attaining understanding and tends to make one settle for a lower—and perhaps unacceptably low—epistemic good” (Callahan, 2025, p. 13). For these reasons I think this is an argument that my view could fall back on as an additional reason not to defer, in the event of a failure in my arguments elsewhere.

Notice that this argument by Callahan seems particularly game theoretic, as it is proposing choosing the option that gives us the most value to ourselves based upon what and how much we value something. If the two options seem to result in the same value, another reason why we may choose the option to not defer and have more incentive to reflect, is that, as noted in chapter one, our agent already has a prior commitment to doing what morality demands and doing the morally correct thing. If my arguments regarding moral understanding show that developing it is the morally superior option, then a pre-existing commitment to morality would provide a substantial reason to continue to develop their moral reasoning skills even if they defer in time sensitive matters to those who are more reliable judge.²⁵

²⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Eirik Harris for his insights regarding this point.

To summarize, this additional reason here is our motivation towards developing moral understanding. If we take moral understanding to have any instrumental value at all towards developing the epistemic abilities of a good moral agent, a development I am claiming is required, and we also admit that thinking for oneself fosters moral understanding then it follows that we should think for ourselves. As the criticism goes, we could simply defer and then reflect after the fact in order to develop moral understanding, thus severing the connection between a need for moral understanding and a reason for not deferring. Callahan is attempting to regain that connection by providing a reason we should not defer, even if the criticism that we can defer and get moral understanding is true, namely by showing that doing so may make it less likely we will actually bother to reflect, as it is disincentivized through deferral, than if we just refused to defer in the first place. So even if it is the case that all the criticisms listed at the beginning paragraph of this section are true, taking deferral as a disincentive could act as the last line of defense for a pessimist view such as mine.

Now that we have finally concluded that it may be better not to defer to the testimony of moral experts, what place does this leave for moral experts and expertise within morality? It would be very strong to say that moral experts and their expertise have no value for morality or the moral deliberation and action of others, and this would not follow from the claim that we should not defer to them. Like other pessimists, in the next section I will be providing reasons for how moral experts are still valuable and how we can incorporate their knowledge into our deliberations.

3.4. Moral Expertise's Remaining Yet Relegated Value

While I have argued in this paper that we should not defer to moral experts and that we should cultivate moral understanding, this does not mean that moral experts are completely

useless for becoming better at moral deliberation, promoting right action, or providing possible moral justifications. I propose that there are still four ways that we can utilize and incorporate the expertise of moral experts into our own deliberation without deferring to their judgements. Philip Nickel, in his paper “Moral Testimony and its Authority,” presents the four ways he calls heuristic dependence, demonstrative dependence, substitutive dependence, and motivational dependence. It will be necessary that I explain each distinctly as the terms and the definitions that Nickel provides for these phenomena are philosophically dense²⁶. Some of these reasons may be contested on the grounds that they require deferral. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that Nickel similarly argues against deferral, so hypothetically these reasons of his, of which I will be expanding upon, should be compatible with not deferring. By deferring, I mean offloading the epistemic labor of moral deliberation by accepting the moral expert's testimony that one should hold some belief or act on some claim, distinct from concurring with them. Adopting and holding moral beliefs, justifications, or moral truths from moral experts upon our own deliberation is not inherently wrong if done in a way that fosters our epistemic abilities. One may adopt doxastic belief states in claims made by moral experts if they morally deliberate themselves and *concur* with the moral expert from reasons irrespective of their expertise. To begin, I will start with the latter, and I think most secure of the four: Motivational Dependence.

Doing the right thing can be hard at times as the morally correct option can often coincide with the option that is not in our self-interest, conflicts with other non-moral values we hold, or are counter to strongly experienced desires. The inverse is also true, that the morally wrong option can have self-interested results that can distract or temper our motivation for doing the right thing. Moral experts can act as a motivating factor for those who may not be inclined

²⁶ I will be relegating Nickel's definitions to footnotes as I want to cite and respect the origin of the concepts, but I think they do more to confuse than help my reader.

towards correct action²⁷²⁸. I think Nickel's conception can be expanded beyond simple utterances from the moral expert of 'X is right/you should do X' to utterances that motivate and/or even to the observation of the entire comportment of the moral expert by the layperson. In some traditions such as Aristotelian virtue ethics or Confucianism, one of the tools for developing virtue is to look to a moral exemplar, in our case moral experts, and attempt to emulate their actions and thought processes. If we have a desire to become better or more moral people and we see someone we look up to reliably acting in a moral manner, sometimes in a way that requires bravery, restraint, or defiance in the face of punishment, lack of reward, or self-interest, this may motivate us to try to do the same. Similarly, moral experts can act as a sort of cheerleader or spokesperson for morality itself by helping to remind us of the importance of thinking about things from a standpoint of concern for morality, moral values, and cultivating moral understanding.

Take the example of Enoch and his friend Alon, who is a moral expert relative to Enoch, and the funding of the war in the Middle East. Say Enoch can't decide what to do and is talking to Alon about various pragmatic concerns he has about what his constituents might think, how lobbyists would react, its indirect connection to other bills funding, how much work it would require of him or his department, etc. Alon may state the importance of moral considerations and say things to Enoch about how he should think about how his decisions will affect the lives of others in ways that would be of moral concern. A statement like this from someone who Enoch thinks to be intelligent, trustworthy, a better person than himself, and a friend may help him

²⁷ I will remain agnostic here as to whether having moral knowledge is inherently motivating or not. This refers to which motivational metaethic is true, internalism or externalism about motivations.

²⁸ Nickel defines Motivational Dependence as "A's utterance of M gives B the motivational encouragement necessary to put B in a position to act on the basis of M" (Nickel, 2001, p. 255).

realize that he should be thinking about what ‘the right thing to do is’ rather than his personal concerns.

The second value of moral experts, substitutive dependence, involves reasons and justifications that can be provided by moral experts and adopted by others to replace justifications they already had that may be weak, incorrect, or not motivating²⁹. This could also be expanded not just to positive reasons, but also moral experts providing reasons for why one might be wrong. Notice here that substitutive dependence implies that the layperson has already deliberated for themselves and come to a belief regarding a moral quandary. This belief may be a central belief that is action guiding, or it could simply be a belief about an opposing consideration that is particularly weak, but relevant. Upon substitution one may either have an even stronger reason to do something or even replace the weak opposing consideration with something stronger that actually sways the outcome of moral deliberation. Say Enoch believes that the war is just because it would spread democracy and freedom to other countries. This might be a reason to think the war just, but it is not particularly strong. Alon may state that the war could also end human rights violations or genocide. Upon deliberation Enoch could realize that ending human rights violations/genocide is more morally important than ‘spreading democracy and freedom’ such that he replaces his previous justification with this new one.

This replacement may be done without deferring to the expert as a simple proposal of a strong moral reason one has not considered, while possibly changing the outcome of our

²⁹ Nickel’s definition of Substitutive Dependence, “A’s utterance of M gives B a reason to believe M, which serves as a substitute for an independent (non-deferential) justification” (Nickel, 2001, p. 255). I do not want my readers to make the mistake of thinking that I am adopting this definition and that it is referring here to the utterance of M by a moral expert itself, as being the substitute for our independent justification. As stated in Normative Justifications or Moral Understanding above, while a moral expert stating it gives us a reason to think it to be true, this should not constitute our only reason for thinking it to be true. It should be incorporated as part of our moral deliberation.

deliberation, does not determine that we should believe it without scrutiny. The replacing of a moral reason in our deliberations, that happened to be stated by a moral expert, for reasons irrespective of their expertise is not deference. If we determine this new reason to be correct, we may now have a stronger justification, reason, or motive to act than we did before, and our moral understanding could become more coherent and consistent.

Thirdly, demonstrative dependence, like substitutive dependence, refers to moral experts' ability to point out morally salient features of a moral circumstance, a moral sensibility if you will. We may have considered the moral circumstance for ourselves and because we have not developed this ability as much as they have, we may miss the moral salience of features of the circumstance that could change the outcome of our deliberation. The distinction from substitutive dependence here is subtle as the new reason provided does not replace one of our reasons, but is something that we considered, but thought not to be morally relevant³⁰. This is referring to some descriptive fact about a moral circumstance that we know to be the case but had maybe not considered or looked at through a moral lens, or possibly in a lapse of judgement thought had no moral import. This can help us defend against many of the cognitive biases that are involved in moral deliberation, namely implicit, confirmation, and egocentric biases. We may not consider certain things as morally salient such as the interests of animals or socially marginalized groups due to the unconscious attitudes we hold about them. We may also look to moral reasons that already justify something that we already believe while minimizing the moral relevance of reasons that go against our already held belief. We may also assume that the way we think about things or what we take to be morally important is the same as others or rely too heavily on our own perceptions and experiences and not consider the experience of others. Say

³⁰ Nickel defines this concept as, "when A utters M, it brings to B's attention the moral salience of some further fact of which B was aware but had not considered relevant" (Nickel, 2001, p. 255).

Enoch knows that engaging in war causes environmental damage, but an anthropocentric standpoint does not take that to be morally relevant to the decision. Alon may provide Enoch with reasons that may convince him that the destruction of ecosystems and wildlife should be thought of as morally important in one's decision about funding the war, even if it is not the strongest reason to avoid war.

Lastly, heuristic dependence, also like demonstrative and substitutive, is about moral experts providing moral reasons and justifications. In this case it is not that the moral expert proposes something that the advisee had already thought about as morally salient in a way they hadn't considered, but providing a new moral claim that the advisee had not previously considered at all³¹. This will have similar advantages to substitutive and demonstrative dependence as it may correct biases as well as provide us with more fully considered and accurate deliberation of the moral circumstance. Say Enoch has morally deliberated and has considered justifiable moral reasons on either side and decides the war is justified in being funded. Then Alon proposes a somewhat hidden reason that it should not be funded that Enoch did not even consider. Say the location where the war would take place would cause the disruption of food production of a product that is a major contributor to a particular uninvolved population's diet, such that it is central to survival. Engaging in the war could cause famine and starvation amongst the uninvolved population. Upon further deliberation, Enoch may think this to be a strong enough reason that he now takes the war, or at least the war plan as it is currently construed, to be morally wrong such that it should not be funded.

If it were to be found that one or several of these ways is incompatible with not deferring, then I would accept removing them as reasons moral experts are still valuable. However, if even

³¹ Defined as, "M is a moral claim which B had not previously considered. Once A utters M, B considers it and is in a position to have a complete justification and motivational disposition for it" (Nickel, 2001, p. 255).

one of them still stands, motivational dependence being the strongest contender, then moral experts would still have some value for others with less moral knowledge or experience. Moral experts themselves clearly have moral value as they are individuals who are doing good things consistently to make the world a better place, but this is separate from what value they may still have for others' moral deliberation and action.

3.5. Conclusion

While at first glance the concept of moral expertise may seem strange to the layperson, I have attempted in this project to show that if we accept certain truths about morality and moral epistemology then it is obvious for moral expertise to exist. It is just not the concept of expertise we employ in the non-moral realm. There are likely going to be times in everyone's life where we are in a moral quandary and do not know what to do, and we look to someone who we view to be more likely to get it right than us. They may tell us what we should do, and I have argued that it is ultimately up to us to determine whether we should act upon their advice without further reflection or not. I have provided here a significant literature review of arguments, epistemological and moral, pro and con, that one can use to help one choose.

I have argued that there is an asymmetry that arises through the epistemic requirements that pertain to the moral realm, but do not in the non-moral realm, namely that to be good moral agents we must develop the epistemic abilities to deliberate ourselves. I have proposed that developing moral understanding is a good way to foster these abilities and that deferring does not result in moral understanding. When we offload the epistemic labor of determining what we ought to do to others, we lose an opportunity to practice moral deliberation in a circumstance with normative force ourselves. I take this to be a reason not to defer to moral experts. If this

reason does not suffice, a further reason regarding motivation has been explicated in this chapter. When we defer it disincentivizes moral deliberation.

Beyond just providing my own arguments I have attempted to refute one of the most prominent argument for deferral in the literature by showing that Enoch's principle does not get him a requirement to defer if deference does not minimize the likelihood of wronging others in the long run. While there are likely more critiques of my view, I have tried to provide rebuttals to the most obvious and strongest of them that space allows. While I have argued there are reasons not to defer to experts, I have closed with some reasons for why they may still be useful regardless. I have focused here on instances of interpersonal quandaries involving moral experts, but there are still more questions to be asked regarding moral expertise's place in society. What roles should they hold in policymaking, committees, or ethics boards? How is moral expertise constituted amongst groups of people as a relative conception may not work for democratic decision making? What do we do in the case of disagreement between moral experts? Not to mention, the topic is still rife with metaethical problems that I began this conversation subsequent to regarding moral realism, recognizing moral experts, and moral epistemology more generally.

If anything, I hope this project leads my readers to more philosophical reflection rather than less. The many problems of philosophy are open ended and I do not take philosophical projects to be a definitive end to conversation. It has always been about providing the best possible arguments we can, discussing them with others, and engaging in dialectic. Philosophy, in my view, deals with the problems that we cannot know with certitude due to the epistemic and metaphysical limits of being human and does not proffer answers with as strong definitude as science. In my opinion, philosophy is ultimately speculative and provisional regarding answers

to questions of the utmost import to us. It deals in providing and evaluating inductive arguments regarding problems whose solutions are never confirmed for us, and a successful argument in philosophy is one that can answer the most questions and gives rise to as few new problems as possible. There are philosophical questions we cannot go through life without answering for ourselves and it only makes sense to believe the strongest inductive arguments. This is the best we can do. To think philosophy has any value, one must already think that one can get closer to truth by reflecting deeply and extensively. I urge my readers to consider and reflect upon my reasoning as well as their reasons for acting, for if they opt to not defer to moral experts because they take me to be more likely to be right than they have failed to grasp my arguments.

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