

# Moral Testimony Goes Only So Far

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## 7.1 Introduction

In this paper, I will argue for answers to two moral questions. I will then identify a tension between the two answers. The first question is “Do false moral views exculpate?” That is, if someone does something morally wrong, while falsely believing that what she is doing is not morally wrong, can her false belief render her blameless? I will argue that it cannot. My answer to “Do false moral views exculpate?” is “No.” The second question is “Can moral testimony provide moral knowledge?” My answer is “Yes.” Surely we can gain moral knowledge from others’ testimony. I will discuss the concern that there is something problematic about moral deference, and argue that even if there is truth to this concern, nevertheless moral testimony can provide moral knowledge.

The tension between my two answers arises as follows. Suppose that my answer to the second question is correct: moral testimony can provide moral knowledge. If moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, then it can provide justified false moral belief. But if moral testimony can provide justified false moral belief, then there can be cases of people acting morally wrongly while holding justified false moral beliefs that they are acting rightly. A person cannot be blameworthy for acting on her justified beliefs. So such a person would not be blameworthy. So false moral beliefs can exculpate, contrary to my answer to the first question.

I will propose a solution that would resolve the tension between my two answers. My solution challenges the claim that if moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, then it can provide justified false moral belief. Relying on the fact that whether a belief is justified is sensitive to a person’s total evidence, I will propose a view on which someone who receives false moral testimony always has contrary evidence that prevents the moral testimony from justifying a false belief. My proposal will be speculative: I aim to

identify an intriguing way of resolving the tension between the two views, without settling that it will ultimately succeed.

## 7.2 Do False Moral Views Exculpate?

It is clearly true that false non-moral beliefs can exculpate. Consider a case in which Anne believes she is spooning sugar into Bill's coffee, but it is really poison. Suppose that Anne has no reason to think that what she is spooning is anything other than sugar. In this case, Anne poisons Bill. Anne kills Bill. But Anne is blameless for killing Bill. She is blameless because of her false non-moral belief that she is putting sugar into his coffee.

Of course, it matters that Anne doesn't have any evidence that something funny is going on. If Anne has ignored some important evidence, then she might well be blameworthy. Suppose Anne's roommate said to her yesterday, "Anne, I have something important to tell you," but Anne just tuned out while her roommate went on to say, "I bought some rat poison, but it looks very similar to the sugar. Be careful!" In that case, Anne's belief that she is putting sugar into Bill's coffee would not render her blameless. In general, it seems that for false non-moral beliefs to render a person blameless for a wrong action, that person must have behaved responsibly in managing her own beliefs.

Do false moral beliefs exculpate, in the way that false non-moral beliefs do?<sup>1</sup>

Consider an ancient slaveholder who keeps slaves. As I understand it, ancient slavery was not race-based; it was not based on false beliefs about one race of persons being superior to another race of persons. Rather, ancient slavery was based on who conquered whom. An ancient slaveholder knew that being a slave was a horrible fate, and thought to himself, "It's awful to be a slave! I'm lucky that my side won the war, because had we lost, I might well have ended up as a slave." While they knew that the lives of slaves were horrible, ancient slaveholders did not believe that slave-holding was morally wrong. They believed that had they themselves ended up as

<sup>1</sup> The claim that false moral belief (or moral ignorance) exculpates is made or suggested in Wolf (1982), Buss (1997), Zimmerman (1997), Rosen (2003, 2004), Smith (2006), and Zimmerman (2010). The claim that false moral belief (or moral ignorance) exculpates is assumed (but not focused on) in McMahan (2009) and Smith (2014). I argue that false moral views do not exculpate in Harman (2011), Harman (2015), and Harman (forthcoming).

This section provides an abbreviated version of the argument in Harman (forthcoming).

slaves, it would not have been wrong of their captors to keep them as slaves. Consider an ancient slaveholder who thinks an ordinary amount about morality, and who wants to live morally and to be a good person. He has not ignored arguments against the permissibility of slavery; none have been presented to him.<sup>2</sup> He has been responsible in the management of his beliefs, in that he has thought a reasonable amount about morality and has taken seriously any arguments that were presented to him.<sup>3</sup> Is he thereby blameless for keeping slaves?

Consider a father in the United States in the 1950s, who is willing to pay for his son to go to college, but is not willing to pay for his daughter to go to college; as a result, she does not get a college education. This man believes that it's important for men to be educated because they will be the breadwinners of their families. College is not important for women, in his view. He too thinks a reasonable amount about morality and wants to live morally and to be a good person. He loves both his daughter and his son. This agent, too, has been responsible in the management of his beliefs. Is he thereby blameless for the sexist treatment of his daughter?<sup>4</sup>

How should we go about answering the question of whether false moral belief is exculpatory? We might start by asking whether the fact that false *non-moral* belief is exculpatory settles that false moral belief must be exculpatory too. It is important to see that it does not. We can grant that false non-moral beliefs exculpate, while denying that false moral beliefs exculpate.

When a person is blameless due to false non-moral belief, although she does something wrong, she does not know *what she is doing*: Anne is blameless because, although she is poisoning Bill, she does not know that she is poisoning Bill (and she was responsible in managing her beliefs in the lead-up to this situation). But when a person has purely moral false beliefs, she does know what she is doing. The following principle provides the

<sup>2</sup> See Moody-Adams (1994) for a challenge to this description of a typical ancient slaveholder.

<sup>3</sup> Note that being responsible in the management of one's beliefs is a matter of what the agent has done intentionally (thinking about morality, taking evidence seriously) but is not a matter of whether the agent's beliefs are epistemically justified. A person can have tried seriously to form the correct view, listened to opposing views, etc. (and thus behaved responsibly in the management of her beliefs) and yet end up with epistemically unjustified beliefs because of a mistake in her reasoning.

<sup>4</sup> Rosen (2003) introduces the examples of the ancient slaveholder and the 1950s sexist father. He takes the examples to provide evidence that moral ignorance is exculpatory. By contrast, I am using the examples to raise the *question* of whether moral ignorance is exculpatory. (My argument does not rely on any claims about whether these agents are blameworthy.)

correct result that Anne is blameless, without rendering a person with false moral beliefs blameless:

A person is blameworthy for an action only if *either* there is a  $\phi$  such that (a) she knew that she was  $\phi$ ing, and (b)  $\phi$ ing is morally wrong *or* she was irresponsible in the management of her beliefs.

Let's consider how this principle applies to Anne. Anne poisoned Bill; it is morally wrong to poison another person; but Anne didn't know she was poisoning Bill. Anne did know that she was putting what she thought was sugar into Bill's coffee; but it is not morally wrong to put what one thinks is sugar into someone's coffee. There is no  $\phi$  such that both Anne knew she was  $\phi$ ing and  $\phi$ ing is morally wrong. So, the principle implies that Anne is blameless.<sup>5</sup> Things are quite different when we turn to considering the cases of the ancient slaveholder and the 1950s sexist. These agents did know what they were doing. The ancient slaveholder knew that he was keeping slaves; and keeping slaves is in fact morally wrong. The 1950s sexist knew that he was depriving his daughter of a college education merely because she was a woman; and it is in fact wrong to do that. Thus, the principle does not imply that these agents are blameless.

So far we haven't settled the answer to our question, "Do false moral views exculpate?" But we've seen that one route to settling the answer doesn't work. We can't simply appeal to the fact that false non-moral beliefs are exculpatory; it does not follow that false moral beliefs must also be exculpatory.

I will offer a brief argument that false moral beliefs do not exculpate. My argument proceeds by considering three cases of agents who act morally wrongly while believing that their actions are morally required. I argue that these cases show that false moral beliefs do not exculpate.

Consider Carl, who is a member of a Mafia family business. He is not literally related to the members of the business, but he considers them his "family." Carl believes that the most central moral value—indeed the only value of any moral importance—is loyalty. The Mafia family makes some of its money by extorting local business owners: they ask for a weekly payment

<sup>5</sup> Note that we must understand the principle to quantify over a restricted domain of action individuations: those that involve qualitative descriptions of actions. For example, we must not allow "give *this stuff* to Bill" as a possible  $\phi$  because Anne knew that she was doing that, and doing that was in fact wrong (this stuff was in fact poison).

for “protection,” with the implied threat of violence if the owner does not pay up. Recently a local store changed ownership, and the new owner refuses to pay. This is a crucial moment for the Mafia family. If they let this go, then businesses all over town may follow the example of the new owner; they could lose a significant amount of their income. Carl believes it is his moral duty to protect the financial interests of the family by sending a clear message to everyone that failure to pay the weekly fee is not optional: he kills the new store owner to set this example. Carl believes he is doing the right thing, by protecting the Mafia family from a serious threat to its long-term stability.

Consider Dawn, who was raised to believe that honesty is a core moral virtue; she believes that it is never morally permissible to lie to another person, and that one must always answer direct questions honestly. Dawn believes in telling the hard truth even if it may hurt her friend’s feelings, and in being honest even if it may cost her something. One day, Dawn’s friend Ethan rushes into her house saying, “Fred is mad at me! He’s going to beat me up!” Ethan goes to hide upstairs. When Fred arrives a few minutes later, Fred asks, “Is Ethan here?” Dawn knows that she could lie to Fred; he would believe her and move on. Knowing Fred, he will calm down if given some time; he will not hurt Ethan if Dawn gets him to leave now. Dawn knows it’s not ever okay for one person to beat another up, and she does not want to help Fred find Ethan, but she believes that she must treat every other human being with respect, which involves answering their questions honestly. She replies as she believes morality requires her to reply: “Yes, he’s here.” Fred beats Ethan up.

Consider George, who believes that it is essential to treat his two children, Harriet and Isaac, perfectly fairly. Isaac loves Pokemon cards and has been searching for ages for a shiny Charizard card. Harriet has no interest in Pokemon cards; she prefers to play with Legos. A family friend gives George two presents for the kids, a pack of Pokemon cards that contains a shiny Charizard card, and an intricate Lego set. When the kids learn what the two gifts are, Isaac says “Oh!! I want the Pokemon cards!!” The two kids were recently fighting over what movie to watch this evening, and Harriet is annoyed with Isaac, so she says “Me too! I want the Pokemon cards,” even though she would actually prefer the Legos, and even though everyone knows that. George hears both requests and says, “you have both asked for the Pokemon cards, so to be fair I will have to flip a coin.” He flips a coin, Harriet wins the toss, and George gives Harriet the cards. Of course, George should not have treated this as a case in which *fairness* is the crucial issue.

He should have distributed the toys according to the children's actual desires, and given them what would make them happy, either ignoring or lightly criticizing Harriet's spiteful request.

I claim that in all of these cases, the agents are clearly blameworthy for their morally wrong actions. Carl may be the clearest case: he is blameworthy for committing the murder. But Dawn also provides a clear case of blameworthiness. To see this, compare Ethan's attitude toward Dawn to Bill's attitude toward Anne. Suppose that Ethan resents Dawn for causing him to be beaten up, and suppose that Bill realizes everything that happened as he is dying, and that he resents Anne for poisoning him. Bill's resentment of Anne is misguided; for him to resent her is for him to make a mistake. But Ethan's resentment of Dawn is warranted.<sup>6</sup> Finally, George's behavior is also clearly blameworthy, though lower-stakes.

The three agents remain clearly blameworthy if we spell out more explicitly certain features of the cases. Carl, Dawn, and George have each thought a reasonable amount about morality, and each wants to live morally and to be a good person. Now, these three agents are importantly different from the ancient slaveholder: we cannot say that they have no idea that their actions may be morally wrong. Each agent is well aware that other people in their wider societies disagree with their moral views: Carl knows that others think that killing for financial gain is morally wrong; Dawn knows that others think that one should sometimes lie to spare another person's feelings, or to keep them safe; and George knows that others take fairness less seriously than he does. But each agent believes that others are simply *mistaken* about what morality requires; and each thinks they know how others have gone wrong. For example, Carl's view could be summed up as follows: others have been suckered into a false, touchy-feely belief that all strangers should matter to oneself and can give one moral reasons.

The cases of Carl, Dawn, and George show that false moral belief is not exculpatory. Though Carl, Dawn, and George have false moral beliefs, and though they have behaved responsibly in the management of their moral beliefs, they are nevertheless blameworthy for their actions.<sup>7</sup>

I have already shown that a principle according to which false non-moral belief is exculpatory need not imply that false moral belief is exculpatory.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, Dawn is not blameworthy for *beating Ethan up*; she didn't do that. Ethan resents her for what she did do: telling the truth and thus causing him to be beaten up.

<sup>7</sup> In section 7.3, I discuss the objection that these cases cannot show that false moral belief is *never* exculpatory.

Can more be said about what makes a person blameworthy, and why false non-moral belief is exculpatory while false moral belief isn't? Yes. We can say the following:

People are blameworthy for acting wrongly when they act wrongly because they care inadequately about those features of the world that really matter. A person might care inadequately about those features of the world that really matter while caring deeply about *morality*.

The view I am offering holds that one's merely *wanting to be moral* is irrelevant to whether one is blameworthy for one's actions.<sup>8</sup> What matters is *what one cares about*, substantively. A person who cares to avoid harming others, to avoid lying to them, and to keep her promises thereby cares about some things that really do matter morally. A person who doesn't care about whether she keeps her promises cares inadequately about something that matters morally. Anne is blameless because, although she kills someone, her behavior does not stem from her caring inadequately about something that matters morally. She cares to avoid poisoning Bill. She cares to avoid killing him. By contrast, Carl, Dawn, and George fail to care adequately about some things that matter morally. Carl doesn't care enough about avoiding killing innocent people; Dawn doesn't care enough about protecting her friend from harm; and George doesn't care enough about making his kids happy, nor does he care enough about avoiding helping one of his children to treat the other spitefully.

Similarly, the ancient slaveholder doesn't care enough about avoiding slaveholding. And the 1950s sexist father doesn't care enough about giving his daughter an education, and about giving her the same opportunities that she'd be entitled to if she were a boy. On my view, these failures to care adequately about things that really matter—features of their actions of which they are aware—ground the blameworthiness of these agents.<sup>9,10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> My opponents take *wanting to be moral* to be crucial: the person who holds a false moral view is taken to have a morally good motivation because they want to be moral, even though they also want to do something that is in fact horrible, such as kill an innocent person, prevent gay marriage, or keep slaves.

<sup>9</sup> The view I am offering here is similar to the view of Arpaly (2003). For a worry about Arpaly's view, see Harman (2007). See Arpaly (2018) for an argument that moral ignorance does not undermine blameworthiness, because moral ignorance does not undermine praiseworthiness. See Harman (forthcoming) for additional argument for my view, development of my view, and discussion of some objections.

<sup>10</sup> Typically, when a person *cares inadequately* about something that matters morally, this will be because she *fails to care adequately* about it. But in some cases, a person may care

My answer to the question “Do false moral views exculpate?” is “No.” In section 7.3, I will discuss an objection to the argument I gave for this answer. Then, in section 7.4, I will turn to a question about moral testimony.

### 7.3 Objection: My Opponent Can Agree that Carl, Dawn, and George Are Blameless

In section 7.2, I offered the cases of Carl, Dawn, and George, and I said that it’s clear that these agents are blameworthy for their morally wrong actions. I said that this shows that false moral belief *does not* and *cannot* be exculpatory. But, an objector might ask, how can it show that? After all, these are just three cases. Don’t they simply show that at least sometimes, false moral belief fails to exculpate?

The objection brings out that my argument involves the following assumption:

Any reasonable version of the view that false moral belief is exculpatory must hold that false moral belief is exculpatory in the cases of Carl, Dawn, and George, or at least in suitably clarified versions of those cases.

In this section, I will respond to the objector by arguing for this assumption.

Let’s begin by setting one issue aside. I’ve already noted that false non-moral belief is not exculpatory if an agent was irresponsible in the course of forming her belief. Similarly, someone who holds that false moral belief is exculpatory need not hold that it is *always* exculpatory: she can hold that if the agent was irresponsible in the course of forming her belief, then the belief is not exculpatory. The stipulations I have already made are meant to establish that Carl, Dawn, and George have not been irresponsible in the course of forming their beliefs: they have thought a reasonable amount about morality, and although they are aware that people disagree with their moral views, they think they understand where others have gone wrong.

inadequately about something even though she also cares adequately about it. Human psychology is such that we sometimes hold incompatible beliefs, and similarly, we sometimes hold incompatible attitudes of care. For a person who simultaneously cares adequately about something morally important but also has an attitude of caring that involves inadequately caring about that thing, when the latter attitude moves her to action, she will thereby be blameworthy for her action. See Harman (forthcoming).



The most straightforward version of my opponent's view holds that *all* false moral beliefs are exculpatory, in the following sense. Whenever one acts wrongly while falsely believing that one was acting morally permissibly, one is not originally blameworthy for one's action; nevertheless, one may be derivatively blameworthy for one's action if one was irresponsible in the course of forming one's moral beliefs. (Compare: when one hurts someone because one is high on a drug, one may not be originally blameworthy for one's action, although if one took the drug knowing this kind of thing might well happen, then one may be derivatively blameworthy for hurting the person.) This version of my opponent's view will indeed hold that Carl, Dawn, and George are blameless. Before we turn to considering an alternative version of the view, I want to note that when we move away from this version, we lose something important. What motivates the view that people are blameless for relying on their own moral beliefs? It is sometimes said that an agent has no other options than to rely on her own beliefs about how she ought to act—that we can't escape relying on the beliefs we actually have. To the extent that this is the motivation for my opponent's view, it can't support a switch to the alternative version of the view I will now go on to consider.

Consider the following version of my opponent's view: Setting aside cases in which agents are irresponsible in the course of forming their beliefs, *epistemically justified* false moral beliefs are exculpatory. We want to consider a version of my opponent's view that is non-trivial, so we want to consider a version of the view on which there is a not-tiny category of people whose morally wrong actions are blameless because of their false moral beliefs. So the view must hold that it is possible to become epistemically justified in false moral views, indeed that this happens in a non-tiny category of cases. How would this occur? Presumably it would sometimes occur via false testimony, and sometimes through contemplation of seemingly compelling but misleading arguments. These must be viable routes to justified false moral belief, on my opponent's view. However, once we allow that these can be ways of developing justified false moral beliefs, we should see that Carl, Dawn, and George have come to their beliefs via exactly these kinds of routes: Carl is part of a small community who prizes loyalty as the central moral virtue; Dawn was taught to take honesty to be fundamental; and George's commitment to fairness is based on honest moral reflection. While it's true that each agent also knows that there are others who dispute their beliefs, they possess seemingly compelling arguments that these others are mistaken. As I have already described Carl, Dawn, and George, the

version of my opponent's view that we are considering will imply that Carl, Dawn, and George are blameless.

If necessary, we can also consider variants of the cases of Carl, Dawn, and George. Consider whatever mechanism my opponent thinks provides a route to justified false moral belief. We can consider versions of Carl, Dawn, and George who come to their beliefs via this mechanism. They will be blameless for their actions, according to my opponent. But no matter how Carl, Dawn, and George have come to their views, they know what they are doing: Carl knows he is killing an innocent person for financial gain; Dawn knows she is telling the truth in a way that will lead her friend to be beaten up; and George knows he is helping one of his kids to spitefully deprive the other kid of what would make him happy. These agents are blameworthy.

#### 7.4 Can Moral Testimony Provide Moral Knowledge?

Let's turn now to considering a second question: Can moral testimony provide moral knowledge?

It is uncontroversial that testimony can provide knowledge of non-moral matters. Scientists give us a great deal of knowledge of the world that we possess only through testimony; we non-scientists lack the skills to figure these things out for ourselves. Ordinary people give us a great deal of knowledge that we possess only through testimony; sometimes this is because others simply witnessed things that we did not, or simply learned things that we have not.

Can testimony provide knowledge of moral matters? Surely it can. Here are some examples:

- My toddler daughter Rosalinda sometimes hits my eight-year-old daughter Annalucia. On such occasions, we say to Rosalinda, "Be gentle! It isn't nice to hit. You shouldn't hit." Over time, Rosalinda comes to learn that it isn't nice to hit other people, and that she shouldn't hit other people.
- From a young age, Jane is taught by her minister that she owes respect to her parents and her teachers. Jane believes him and comes to know that she owes respect to her parents and her teachers.
- Kevin is trying to decide whether to fail a student who has been struggling with some personal problems, and has not completed the

course's major paper. Kevin consults his senior colleague Lois. Lois says, "Given what you say has been going on in the student's home life, it would be wrong to fail him. You should give him an incomplete." Kevin thereby comes to know that it would be wrong to fail the student.

- Mark thinks that the black students at his wealthy university were being silly when they took over the university president's office with a list of demands. Mark's student Nathan, who is black, says to Mark, "Things are really bad for us. People say little racist things to us all every day. Taking over the president's office was the right thing to do." Mark thereby comes to know that taking over the president's office was the right thing to do.

I claim that these are all cases in which moral testimony provides moral knowledge.

Note that my claim is that the Kevin and Lois case is an ordinary case; this kind of thing happens in the actual world sometimes. People do gain moral knowledge this way. Sometimes one knows that one's colleague is wise about how students should be treated, and one gains knowledge by relying on one's colleague's view. Similarly, I claim that the Mark and Nathan case is an ordinary case; this kind of thing happens in the actual world sometimes. But I don't claim that *whenever* people offer the kind of testimony that occurs in these cases, one must believe the claims they make, nor that whenever such testimony-based belief is formed, it is thereby knowledge. My claim is just that sometimes this kind of testimony is offered, it is believed, and the testimony-based belief constitutes knowledge.

An objector might dispute that these are really cases in which a person comes to know a moral claim *on the basis of* testimony. Perhaps testimony is merely facilitating a person's coming to know a moral truth on other grounds. Rosalinda may come to notice that others are sad and upset when she hits them, and on that basis Rosalinda ultimately realizes that it is not nice to hit. If so, while the testimony has facilitated her moral knowledge, it has not provided or grounded that knowledge. Lois and Nathan both give some reasons along with the moral judgments they offer; perhaps they are merely drawing their listeners' attention to moral arguments. If testimony simply draws someone's attention to a moral argument, then while the testimony facilitates the moral knowledge that ensues, the testimony does not provide or ground the moral knowledge.

While it is no doubt true that sometimes testimony merely facilitates the acquisition of moral knowledge, surely testimony does sometimes ground

moral knowledge directly. Note that Lois doesn't explain what about this student's case settles that Kevin should not fail him; so we can't really say that Lois has simply pointed Kevin toward a moral argument. For an even clearer case, suppose that Lois had been in a hurry and had simply replied, "Thanks for emailing me about that situation. It would be wrong to fail the student. -L." In that case, Kevin could thereby come to know that it is wrong to fail the student on the basis of his more-experienced colleague's testimony.

Some philosophers have claimed that moral deference is odd or troubling.<sup>11</sup> And indeed it may seem odd to imagine Kevin simply deferring to Lois on whether to fail the student. It may seem that when one simply defers on a moral question, one fails to act as a full moral agent, thinking one's actions through for oneself and coming to one's own conclusions about what to do. Moral deference can seem to be an abdication of one's moral agency. And moral deference may seem to deprive one's action of moral worth. If an action has moral worth just in case the agent performed the action for the reasons that make it a morally good thing to do, then the action of an agent whose action stems from moral deference may lack moral worth. This agent may be acting because she believes she's doing the right thing, but not in response to the particular features of the case that makes her action the right thing to do.

Let's suppose that this is right: there is something problematic or inferior about coming to a moral judgment via moral deference. This claim is compatible with the claim that moral testimony can provide moral knowledge. It could be that it is morally better to think things through for oneself, and to come to *understand why* one should act as one should act. But it may nevertheless be true that one can come to *know* what one should do on the basis of testimony.<sup>12</sup>

We should be a bit cautious about whether it is in general true that it is better to think a moral question through for oneself. Some people may realize that they are not good at thinking through difficult moral questions, and they may realize that certain people they know actually do better at

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of moral deference as odd or troubling, see McGrath (2009), Hills (2009), and McGrath (2011). For a critique, see Sliwa (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Hills (2009) and McGrath (2011) say that actions that arise from moral testimony may have lower moral worth. Hills claims that agents should aim to achieve moral understanding, and that is why they should not engage in moral deference. While Hills and McGrath see moral deference as (at least apparently) problematic, they also acknowledge that moral testimony can provide moral knowledge.

getting difficult moral questions right. One might be behaving *more responsibly* as a moral agent to seek the judgment of people one respects, and to defer to them.<sup>13</sup> And in cases such as Mark's, one may be behaving in a more morally sensitive way when one defers to those who are situated differently than oneself, recognizing that others sometimes have better access to the moral truth in a situation because of what they have experienced.<sup>14</sup>

My answer to "Can moral testimony provide moral knowledge?" is "Yes."

## 7.5 The Worry: A Tension between my Two Answers

I have considered two moral questions and argued for two answers: false moral views cannot exculpate, and moral testimony can provide moral knowledge. In this section, I will show that there is a tension between my two answers. The worry begins with the following claim:

(i) If moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, then it can provide justified false moral belief.

Suppose that moral testimony can provide moral knowledge. To count as knowledge, a belief must be *justified*. It follows that sometimes when one person makes a moral claim, this testimony gives another person *justification* for believing that the moral claim is true; this must happen whenever moral testimony provides moral knowledge. But then surely sometimes a person makes a false moral claim that nevertheless provides justification for someone else to believe the claim. This is part of the nature of justification: a route to justified true belief will also sometimes lead to justified false belief.

The worry continues with the following claim:

(ii) If a person has a justified false moral belief, then she cannot be (morally) blameworthy for acting on that belief (if she has behaved responsibly in managing her beliefs).

In support of (ii), one might say that it is surely reasonable for one's actions to be guided by one's justified beliefs. But surely a person cannot be morally blameworthy for behaving reasonably.

<sup>13</sup> Sliwa (2012) presses this point in response to Hills (2009).

<sup>14</sup> See Jones (1999) on the way that a member of an oppressed group can provide moral knowledge through moral testimony.

From claims (i) and (ii), this claim follows:

(iii) If moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, then false moral views *can* exculpate.

My answers to the questions in sections 7.2 and 7.4 thus seem to be in tension: if moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, as I claim, then it seems that false moral views can exculpate, contrary to my argument above. As I see it, the claim that moral testimony can provide moral knowledge is the more secure of the two claims. Thus, this tension provides a challenge to my claim that false moral views cannot exculpate.

Claim (ii) is hard to dispute (though I question it in other work).<sup>15</sup> In this paper, I will grant claim (ii).

I will propose a way of resolving the tension—and defending the claim that false moral views cannot exculpate—by offering a view on which claim (i) is false.

## **7.6 My Proposed Solution to the Worry: Moral Testimony Goes Only So Far**

In general, if testimony can provide knowledge of claims within a certain domain, then it seems that testimony should be able to provide justified false belief in claims within that domain. After all, what could make the situation asymmetric? If someone tells you something about the domain, this can make you justified in believing it. If the person had knowledge, and it's a normal case, then you thereby gain knowledge. If the person told you something false, then you thereby gain a justified but false belief.

I will propose a view on which, for the domain of morality, there is an asymmetry in whether testimony can provide justified belief. To see how there could be an asymmetry, I want to point out something about the way testimony provides justification. Whether testimony for a claim makes one justified in believing that claim depends on things beyond the testimony; it depends on what other evidence one has. Whether a belief is justified is sensitive to the believer's total evidence.

<sup>15</sup> See Harman (forthcoming).

Suppose that you already possess evidence for a truth T, but you have not realized that T is true. Suppose further that someone tells you that T is true. In this case, you can become justified in believing T on the basis of testimony. The testimony you received provides evidence that T is true, and you do not possess conflicting evidence. The fact that you possess independent evidence for the truth of T, on which you are not relying, does not in any way undermine the testimonial evidence for T.

By contrast, suppose that you already possess evidence for a truth T, and have not realized that T is true, but then you receive testimony that T is false. Can this erroneous testimony provide a justified false belief that T is false? It may not be able to do so. If the evidence for the truth of T is strong enough, and sufficiently accessible, then your possession of that evidence will undermine or outweigh the testimonial evidence you've received for T's falsity. In such a case, you cannot become justified in believing that T is false on the basis of testimony, because your total evidence does not support the belief that T is false.

Thus, if one already possesses evidence for a truth T, one can be in an asymmetric situation regarding testimony as to whether T is true: while testimony for T's truth can provide knowledge that T is true, testimony for T's falsity cannot provide justified false belief that T is false.

I propose that people are in this kind of situation regarding all moral truths.

My proposal:

Because ordinary life includes a great deal of evidence for true moral claims: Moral testimony can be a source of moral knowledge.

But moral testimony cannot be a source of justified false moral beliefs.

My proposal involves the strong claim that ordinary life provides enough evidence for the moral truth that people are never in a position to justifiably believe false moral claims. Note that I do not deny that testimony can provide *some reason* to believe false moral claims. I simply deny that people are ever in a situation in which their *total evidence* supports a false moral claim.

The evidence that people possess for the moral truth comes in many forms. Some of that evidence comes from one's own experience. What evidence does Carl have that the suffering of another person, even a person outside his in-group, gives him a reason for action? His own experiences constitutes evidence that others' suffering matters. Carl's experience of the badness of his own pain constitutes evidence that pain is bad, and that

others' pain gives him reasons. Carl's experience of his own plans and desire for his future constitutes evidence that a person's survival matters, and is thus evidence that he has reasons not to take another person's life. Some of one's evidence for the moral truth comes from one's experience interacting with and relating to other people. Some of one's evidence for the moral truth comes from one's own emotional reactions to how others treat oneself and how one treats other people. Some of one's evidence for the moral truth comes from explicit moral reasoning. The moral evidence that people possess is diverse; and the claim in my proposal is that it is a rich body of evidence.

## 7.7 Objections to my Proposed Solution

In this section, I will discuss six objections to my proposed solution.

First, an objector might point out that one common phenomenon in moral thinking is that a person thinks hard about a moral question, tries to get it right, and ends up getting it wrong because they engaged in a subtle, bad form of reasoning. For example, often people fall into being persuaded by bad arguments that others made. Surely a person is reasonable and justified in believing a conclusion they have come to via thinking seriously about a moral question? My response to this objection is that fallacious reasoning—no matter how compelling—is not a route to justified belief. This is true, regardless of subject matter.<sup>16</sup>

Second, an objector might grant my proposal's claim that agents are confronted with a great deal of evidence for the moral truth, while also pointing out that agents are confronted by a great deal of misleading evidence against the moral truth. False testimony is a big part of this evidence, but it is not all of it. Being raised in a culture that condemns ordinary, healthy behavior can make a person feel pangs of guilt when doing something that is actually morally fine or morally good—think of someone raised to feel guilty for having any “lustful” thoughts at all, or someone raised to feel guilty for

<sup>16</sup> When a person embraces the conclusion of a bad argument, her evidence is not simply “I thought about this seriously and came to this conclusion”; rather, the basis of her belief is the actual reasoning that she went through. Because that reasoning is not good reasoning, it does not result in a justified belief. The point I am making here is related to the point that Kelly (2006) makes, that in cases of peer disagreement, the person who reasoned correctly is basing her conclusion on a good justification (her actual good reasoning), not on the fact that she drew the conclusion.



being sexually attracted to someone of the same sex. Think also of the moral emotions inculcated in someone raised by Klu Klux Klan members, or simply raised by a contemporary Trump supporter railing about the need for a border wall. Children raised in these environments might feel a moral horror of helping members of certain groups, or of welcoming them. As the objector points out, misleading testimony is powerful: it affects many of the routes to moral knowledge that I mentioned in laying out my proposal. It can affect one's own moral emotions and reactions; and it can affect how one perceives the situations one experiences.

While the second objector states a serious worry for my proposal, I think that my proposal can be defended. I will say two things in response. First, it's important that the moral truth is not arbitrary; the moral truth is not contingent. We do not simply live in a world in which the moral truth happens to be one way, while it could have been another way. No: the moral reality supervenes on the non-moral reality. There is a reason that people raised in strict, sexist, or racist cultures sometimes have epiphanies on their own, without being taught to think differently: the moral truth is compelling in its own right. Our human capacities allow us to see and feel the wrongness of false moral views we are taught. I don't claim it is easy for anyone; I simply claim that it's available to all. Quite a bit of good reasoning, and good insight, is hard to achieve, even when it's available.

My second response to the objection is that when people are brought up by cultures with false moral views, in practice they are always taught a great deal of false *non-moral* information. They are taught that one race is more intelligent than another, that one sex is more intelligent than another, that children are not safe around gay people, or that contraception causes infertility, for some examples. My proposal concerns *purely moral claims*: the proposal holds that, when it comes to purely moral claims, mature agents always have enough evidence that they cannot be justified in believing false moral claims. The proposal does not hold that learning false non-moral claims cannot make someone justified in believing a specific false moral claim that would be true if a false non-moral belief she holds were true.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Two further notes about this second response to the objector. First, nowadays it can be hard to be justified in believing some of these awful non-moral claims, even if one hears them often. See Moody-Adams (1994) on affected ignorance and how it does not mitigate blame; some of the agents the objector discusses will turn out to be blameworthy for their wrong actions because their false *non-moral* beliefs are blameworthy. Second, I don't mean to suggest that whenever a false moral claim is said to be supported by some awful non-moral claims, that it is actually well-supported by them. In some cases, the right responses to the claims of the

Let me turn to considering a third objection. An objector might point out that, like morality, mathematics is an a priori domain. And yet, it is possible to become justified in believing false mathematical claims. For example, if my mathematician friend Peter tells me that a particular mathematical claim is true, I will be justified in believing him, even if it is false. My response to this objection is to clarify that my proposal's claims are not supposed to rest simply on the fact that moral reasoning can be done a priori, or that moral truths can be realized a priori. In fact, the evidence I appealed to included experiential and emotional evidence. Thus, I do not want to support the proposal by endorsing anything like the following claim: if a domain is a priori, then one cannot come to have justified false beliefs in that domain. I agree with the objector that that claim is false, and that mathematics shows it to be false.

I will discuss the next two objections together; both of these objections raise the worry that if my proposal is right that we have a great deal of evidence for the moral truth, then two other parts of the view I'm offering in this paper cannot be right. The fourth objector points out that I have claimed that people can get the moral truth wrong while having behaved responsibly in managing their beliefs; but if the moral truth is so accessible, how can an agent behave responsibly and yet get the moral truth wrong? The fifth objector points out that I have claimed that people do sometimes gain moral knowledge on the basis of testimony, without testimony merely facilitating their recognition of an independent moral argument for the moral claim in question; but if the moral truth is so accessible, then how can we be sure that agents who hear moral testimony are really relying on the testimony and not simply prompted by that testimony to see the moral truth on the basis of the evidence I claim they possess?<sup>18</sup>

My response to these objections begins by distinguishing the question of whether the evidence is possessed by us, and whether the moral truth is *available* to us, from the question of whether it would be easy for us to realize the moral truth. All parties to these discussions ought to acknowledge that it can be very hard to realize the moral truth. There are many cases in which people earnestly try to get the moral truth right, think hard about morality, and yet get the moral truth badly wrong—disastrously so. That fact

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racist, the sexist, and the homophobe include *both* “that empirical claim is false” and “even if it were true, it wouldn't be okay to treat people as you want to treat them.”

<sup>18</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for the fifth objection.

is where we start. The fact that people can behave completely responsibly in managing their beliefs—take arguments seriously, think hard, earnestly do their best—and still get morality wrong, is the fact that gives rise to our first question: do false moral views exculpate? My proposal does not challenge this basic fact, that ethics is hard. Rather, my proposal relies on the fact that people do not always react appropriately to evidence that they possess; they do not always see what is right in front of them, or realize what is available to be realized. My proposal claims that this is what is happening with the moral truth, when people get it wrong. In response to the fourth objection, whether a person *behaves responsibly* in the management of her beliefs is a matter of whether she listens to arguments that are presented to her, whether she pays attention to what she knows to be evidence that is relevant to her question, and whether she spends a reasonable amount of time thinking about morality; whether her behavior in managing her beliefs is responsible is a matter of what she does intentionally. But a person can behave responsibly and yet end up with epistemically unjustified beliefs. In response to the fifth objection, my claim is that as a matter of psychological reality, people do sometimes defer to others' moral testimony without understanding why the relevant moral claim is true. Although they possess the relevant evidence, in fact they do not always access it at the time they come to believe. While it is part of my proposal that we all have a lot of evidence for the moral truth, it is no part of my proposal that it is always easy to realize what this evidence supports.

This now raises a sixth objection: if on my view it is difficult to realize the moral truth—if it would require the kind of sophisticated moral reasoning that we cannot expect from ordinary people—then it is not at all clear that possession of evidence for the moral truth actually undermines justification for false moral beliefs. In response to this objection, I want to clarify that while it is certainly true that for some people, realizing the moral truth is difficult, that is not because the route to the moral truth would require complex, sophisticated reasoning. For many people, it is difficult to realize certain moral truths in that, although they are earnestly trying to get those moral questions right, they end up getting them wrong. But for these same people, there may well be available to them a very simple route to the moral truth. It might only take seeing a consideration in a new way, or putting together something right in front of them. This route to the moral truth is simple in that, if taken, it is a straightforward and short path; but the route is not easy in that there may be no particular thing that a person can intentionally do to ensure that she finds her way onto this path. It is not part of the view I am

offering that realizing the moral truth requires complicated moral reasoning that is inaccessible to ordinary people; it is part of the view I am offering that people who try earnestly to get morality right often do get it wrong.

## 7.8 Conclusion

I've considered the following questions and offered the following answers:

"Do false moral views exculpate?" My answer: "No."

"Can moral testimony provide moral knowledge?" My answer: "Yes."

I've argued that there is a tension between my two answers. Because it is so plausible that moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, this tension poses a challenge to the view that false moral views do not exculpate. I have proposed a way to defend my view—that false moral views do not exculpate—in the face of this challenge. The challenge arises partly because it seems so clear that any route to knowledge must also provide a route to justified *false* belief. I have argued that when it comes to testimony, there can be an asymmetry: a person can be in a position in which true testimony provides knowledge, while false testimony cannot provide false belief. The possibility of this surprising phenomenon opens the door to my proposal, that moral testimony goes only so far. My proposal is that while moral testimony can provide moral knowledge, it cannot provide justified false moral belief, because a person's total evidence never supports belief in a false moral claim. My proposal is speculative; my goal has been to argue for the tension and to sketch a possible direction for a solution.<sup>19</sup>

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