

## XX Moral Testimony

There are two possible worries that one might have about moral testimony. Firstly one might deny that it can give rise to moral knowledge. Secondly, one might accept that it can give rise to knowledge, but deny that having moral knowledge is good enough. Maybe when it comes to morals there is something more that we want.

Jones' example of Peter. He has principles into which the particular beliefs would fit. (Spell them out.) He doesn't lack particular moral beliefs; he disagrees with the women's beliefs since he thinks these are formed from prejudice. Deny the latter (weak deference); assume women speak truly (shown by subsequent acts).

Children need moral guidance, and need to take moral testimony. But do adults? We accept the need for experts in many fields. But we are cautious in ethics.

Why? Because it's *a priori*? No: contrast maths and aesthetics. Because it is *a priori* and we can do it ourselves? No: there is no need to do the maths yourself, even if you can.

Aesthetics example: Paul. Monet: *Impression: Sunset*. What's wrong with Paul? We'd certainly be happy that he *act* on testimony. But: (i) he shouldn't pass himself off as something he isn't; (ii) his judgment here is brittle: he lacks the ability to make further related judgments; (iii) in accepting aesthetic judgements in this way, there is no guarantee that his position will have any coherence; there are too many conflicting but justifiable positions (but coherence is more likely if they copy it all on authority).

Could these be factors for ethics too? Perhaps; but even when these factors are eliminated, there seems to be a further consideration to do with the need to grasp *reasons*. Three different ways of understanding this:

*Comprehension constraint*: to understand a moral fact one must grasp the reasons.

*Knowledge constraint*: to know a moral fact one must grasp the reasons.

*Moral requirement constraint*: we morally require people to grasp their moral reasons. It's not good enough to get it right. It's not good enough to get it right for good reasons. One needs to get it right for good reasons and know what those reasons are. (But perhaps one cannot articulate them fully; one needs to be aware of them, and aware of when they are not met.)

The comprehension and knowledge constraints are implausibly strong (Peter knows the principles that contain the words; and what grounds do we have for denying him knowledge). But the moral requirement constraint has some plausibility.

Here ethics does differ from aesthetics in the requirements that we put upon people. We think that the aesthetic authority must understand the reasons for her judgements; but, eliminating the factors mentioned above, we are happy with a person who is not an aesthetic authority making judgments on the basis of the authority's testimony. In contrast, whilst we are reasonably happy with the idea of someone being a moral authority (i.e., more prosaically, with the idea of being *wise*), we are not happy with the idea that it is morally acceptable for a mature moral agent to accept their testimony without grasping, and sharing, their reasons. The requirement is plausibly linked to the need to be able to *justify*.

Is this too strong? We form beliefs about all sorts of things without knowing our reasons for doing so: chicken sexing; person sexing. It is implausible that we need to know our reasons in these cases. Yet some moral judgments, involving the application of thick moral concepts, are very much like these perceptual judgments. Perhaps it is all right to accept moral testimony in these cases. The problem arises in accepting moral testimony for principles.

Back to Peter. Does he grasp the reasons behind the moral judgments that he might take on trust? Perhaps he just needs extra non-moral facts. Jones argues that this is wrong: to identify sexism is to make a moral judgement. Let's grant that. More plausible: he has the moral principles ('Sexism is wrong'), and hence the main reasons that justify his moral actions; but he needs help in making the low level moral judgments that are needed to apply them. Acceptance of low-level moral judgments on the basis of bare testimony, is fine when fitted into a justificatory framework of higher-level principles. Contrast two cases we are not happy with: someone accepting testimony concerning higher-level principles; someone accepting testimony concerning low-level judgments when these are not fitted into a framework of principles.

Can we divide off judgments about principles from the low-level applications in this way? Or at least, can we see them as falling on a continuum? Hard line particularists say no: every moral judgement is akin to a perceptual judgment. But now we can turn this into an argument against the hard line particularist. If things were really as the hard-line particularists say, we'd never be happy with accepting moral testimony; but we sometimes are; so there is something wrong in their position.

Have we got a sufficient condition for the reasonable acceptance of moral testimony? Not quite. Distinguish:

- (i) agents who know they are unable to apply the moral concepts;
- (ii) agents who believe they are able to apply the moral concepts, when they aren't.

We are happier with cases in the first class than in the second. Peter is in the second class; there would be something somewhat craven about his deferring. But we might think that there is a need for moral modesty that he lacks: a realization that he might well be wrong.

What would the inability to apply the moral concepts stem from? Typically from a lack of empathy. Distinguish the epistemological and motivational roles for empathy. Findings from autism on the one hand, and from psychopathology on the other, suggests that both roles are important. One people accept moral testimony it is normally to overcome deficiencies with the former.