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# Moral Understanding and Cooperative Testimony

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## Abstract

It has been argued that there is a problem with moral testimony: testimony is deferential, and basing judgments and actions on deferentially acquired knowledge prevents them from having moral worth. What morality perhaps requires of us, then, is that we understand why a proposition is true, but this is something that cannot be acquired through testimony. I argue here that testimony can be both *deferential* as well as *cooperative*, and that one can acquire moral understanding through cooperative testimony. The problem of moral testimony is thus not a problem with testimony generally, but a problem of deferential testimony specifically.

**Keywords:** understanding; testimony; moral knowledge; moral understanding

## 1. The problem of moral testimony

Testimony is one of our primary sources of knowledge. Often, testimony serves as a kind of shortcut to knowledge: in many cases I *could* have come to know something by myself, but I have things to do, and limited resources, so it is often much easier to just defer to someone else. Typically, there does not seem to be anything inappropriate about acquiring knowledge in this way, as long as the testifier is trustworthy and knows what he or she is talking about. It has been argued, however, that *moral knowledge* is an exception: relying on testimony as a source of moral knowledge seems to be inappropriate, or “fishy,” in a way that acquiring other kinds of knowledge is not.<sup>1</sup> This fishiness is often spelled out in terms of *moral worth*: by relying on moral testimony I make a judgment or base an action on the fact that *you told me so*, and judgments and actions that have such a basis lack moral worth, at least to an extent. To better illustrate the problem, consider the following case from Paulina Sliwa (2012, 176):

*Suit:* Sam is standing at the shore of a lake when he sees a drowning child. He believes that saving the child would be a good thing to do but it would involve ruining his new, expensive suit. He cannot decide what to do and there is no one else at the lake, so he decides to call a friend whom he takes to be reliable. His friend tells him that he should save the child, and he believes him and saves the child.

There is something strange about how Sam formed his belief. It is, of course, strange that Sam had to seek out advice about what to do in the first place, although there is nothing strange in general about seeking out knowledge when one is in a state of ignorance. Had Sam instead asked his friend about the shortest route to the lake, or the best place to buy a new suit, we would not think that

<sup>1</sup>David Enoch (2014) and Robert Howell (2014) predominantly use the notion of “fishiness” to describe the general sense of the impropriety of relying on moral testimony, a term that I will adopt here, as well.

anything fishy was going on. Instead, what seems to be strange about Sam's case is that he is deferring with regards to a moral matter, specifically. As Guy Fletcher (2016, 46) puts it, there seems to be an asymmetry in the way we rely on testimony when it comes to empirical matters and when it comes to normative matters such that "pure moral deference ... seems problematic in a way not shared by other forms of deference."

In what way, exactly, is moral testimony problematic? As Robert Hopkins (2007, 629) argues, the problem is not that testimony cannot provide one with moral knowledge, it is rather that testimonial moral knowledge is just not *good enough*:

General epistemic considerations present no obstacle to learning from moral testimony. But it does not follow that there are no obstacles at all. The epistemology may be right, but some other norm nonetheless stands between the recipient and the legitimate formation of moral belief. Testimony might make moral knowledge available, but one should not exploit that resource.

Testimonial moral knowledge is *unusable*, according to Hopkins, because morality demands of us that we do not *merely know* moral truths, but that we also grasp for ourselves the reasons why they are true. The problem, then, is that while testimony might be able to provide us with moral knowledge, it cannot provide us with an epistemic relationship with a proposition that allows us to make relevant judgments or perform relevant actions that have moral worth. As Philip Nickel (2001, 256–57) argues,

Morality aims at guiding action rationally, i.e., from a recognition of the relevant moral requirements. A moral agent must be responsive to morality as such ... in a morally good action, moral considerations must play a role, mediated by cognition or rationality, either in deliberation or in the formation of the psychological states which lead one to act as one does.

Nickel (2001, 257) calls this the *recognition requirement*, and argues that, "it must be the case that morality requires one to act from an understanding of moral claims, and therefore to have an understanding of moral claims that are relevant to action." The idea is that by understanding why a moral claim is true one will meet said requirement, because understanding seems to require not only believing a proposition, but recognizing the reasons why it is true. The problem with moral testimony, then, is that morality demands of us that we not merely know a moral proposition but grasp or understand why it is true, but since testimony is a deferential epistemic source, one cannot rely on testimony and meet the epistemic demands for morally worthy judgments and actions.

Here I want to challenge this picture: I will argue that testimony can be a source of moral understanding, and thus that one can rely on moral testimony in a nonfishy way. The key to this argument is to think about the problem of moral testimony differently by thinking about testimony differently: while testimony has traditionally been conceived of as an entirely *deferential* source of epistemic and doxastic states, I argue here that testimony can also be thought of as a *cooperative* source. I argue that testimony is properly thought of as cooperative when a recipient comes to be in a new epistemic or doxastic state by relying on testimony in such a way that the recipient's background cognitive states play a significant role in how she came to be in that new state. After distinguishing between deferential and cooperative testimony we can then see that the problem of testimony as it has typically been presented is really a conflation of two different problems: a problem of moral testimony and a problem of moral deference. I argue that since not all cases of moral testimony are cases of (exclusively) moral deference, moral testimony will not always be fishy, and will not be fishy precisely in those cases in which moral testimony is cooperative. As a result, we end up with a view in which there is no problem with moral testimony in general, although I leave it open as to whether there may still be a problem with moral testimony that is entirely deferential.

The paper will proceed as follows. In section 2, I present arguments motivating the view that moral testimony is fishy. I then present arguments that attempt to diagnose this problem by showing how morally worthy action and judgment requires grasping or understanding, and how this requirement is not something that one can meet by relying on testimony. In section 3, I distinguish between testimony as a predominantly deferential and cooperative source, and provide an argument that shows that cooperative testimony can be a source of moral understanding. In section 4, I address a number of potential objections, and in section 5, I conclude.

## 2. Fishiness, grasping, and understanding

What, exactly, is so bad about moral deference? A suite of potential answers can be found in moral testimony literature. For example, we might agree with Kant that morality requires of us that we act not merely in accordance with duty but because of duty: if so, then acting in a certain way simply because someone told us to is not acting because of our duty. As Hills (2013) suggests, grasping the reasons why a moral proposition is true can allow us to meet Kant's standards, as grasping these reasons will necessitate considering what our moral duty requires. Without taking a specifically Kantian line, McGrath (2009) and Hills (2009) both argue that moral deference is incompatible with morally worthy action because deference does not allow one to act for *right-making reasons*: in short, morally worthy action requires of us that we act for the reasons that make the action right, and the fact that someone told us that an action was right is not itself a right-making reason. Again, by understanding why a moral proposition is true we are plausibly in a position to have the right kind of epistemic relationship with right-making reasons: one is not going to be able to understand why a moral proposition is true, it seems, if one does not grasp the reasons why it is true. Or, we might think that the role that moral knowledge ought to play in our lives is something that can guide our actions in a wide variety of potential circumstances, and that knowledge acquired deferentially cannot play this role. Again, consider the earlier discussed *Suit*: while Sam's knowledge might allow him to perform the right action in one specific instance, his failure to grasp the reasons why his belief is true means that he will not be able to act in the right way in a range of similar circumstances (say, in a case in which a different child is drowning, or in which a short adult is drowning, or in which it is not an expensive new suit at risk of being ruined but a cheaper, older suit, etc.). We might think, then, that morality requires of us that we not merely do the right thing in a specific circumstance, but to cultivate a generally virtuous character, something that cannot be accomplished by merely deferring to someone else. Finally, when one acquires knowledge that  $p$  through testimony, it seems that one does not deserve a certain kind of *credit* for coming to know that  $p$  because one did not do the cognitive work of figuring out whether  $p$ .<sup>2</sup> One might think, though, that for one's judgments and actions to have moral worth, one must deserve credit for being in the relevant epistemic position upon which those judgments and actions are based.

As we have seen, different authors will sometimes refer to "grasping" or "understanding" as the epistemic relationship that is required for morally worthy judgment and action. So we should ask: What is the nature of grasping and understanding, and how are they related? While there is ongoing debate concerning the nature of understanding, there is a good amount of agreement that understanding requires grasping.<sup>3</sup> We can say in broad strokes that grasping why  $p$  requires that

<sup>2</sup>Note that there are potentially two types of credit involved in coming to know that  $p$  through testimony: credit involved in figuring out whether  $p$  and credit involved in having picked the right person to listen to. Those who argue that knowledge is an achievement, for example, will appeal to the latter kind of credit in explaining the type of achievement involved in testimonial knowledge (see Greco [2010], for example). When discussing the kind of credit necessary for one's epistemic position to serve as a basis for morally worthy beliefs or actions, though, we have the former type in mind: it is precisely the requirement that one has done something oneself in figuring out *that*  $p$  in order for one's belief and actions on the basis of one's epistemic relationship towards  $p$  to have full moral worth.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Kvanvig (2003), Zagzebski (2008), and Hills (2009).

one has doxastic or epistemic relationships with more than just  $p$ ; one needs to also possess reasons that one takes to support the truth of  $p$ , and to mentally represent the relationship between  $p$  and the reasons one takes  $p$  to be true. Here I will posit that grasping why  $p$  requires that one mentally represent the relationship between  $p$  and reasons why  $p$  is true, comprising a *relational structure*. For example, for Sam in *Suit* to grasp why it is the case that he ought to save the child from drowning, he must possess a mental representation of a relational structure consisting of a belief that he ought to save the child, a number of other reasons why he ought to save the child (say, that drowning is a cause of death, that a child dying is a bad thing, that the cost of getting one's clothes wet is greatly outweighed by the benefit of saving a life, etc.), as well as how this belief is supported by his reasons.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, it seems that by its very nature grasping is something that I cannot acquire deferentially: to grasp something implies that I have done the relevant mental work myself. If there is no deferential grasping, then it seems that there is also no deferential *understanding*. This is because understanding why<sup>5</sup>  $p$  requires that one grasp the reasons why  $p$ . There are potentially additional necessary conditions for understanding why  $p$  as well: most commonly accepted are the requirements that, first,  $p$  be true, and second, that one be able to *do* something with one's mental representation of  $p$ . Nickel (2001, 258–59), for example, argues that understanding a moral statement requires that one be able to articulate the reasons why one's belief in that statement is true, must be able to evaluate whether someone else making the same statement is justified in believing it, be able to apply one's belief in a range of appropriate circumstances, be able to establish coherent connections between that claim and other beliefs we have, and to act on that claim when appropriate. Hills (2015) presents a similar list of abilities that one must possess in order to have understanding, such that one possesses *cognitive control* over the relevant proposition.

As I will consider it here, for  $S$  to understand-why  $p$  it must be the case that (i)  $p$  is true; (ii)  $S$  grasps a relational structure consisting of  $p$  and reasons why  $p$ ; and (iii)  $S$  possesses certain abilities with regards to  $p$  such that she has some degree of cognitive control with regards to  $p$  and related propositions. We can see how on such a view of understanding, possessing understanding would plausibly put one in the epistemic position necessary for one's relevant judgments and actions to have moral worth: by grasping a relational structure consisting of the moral proposition and the reasons why it is true, one is thus in a position to be able to act from right-making reasons (since one will possess said reasons). Similarly, by having cognitive control over the relevant proposition one will then be able to judge and act in right ways in a variety of different circumstances. Again, if we accept a view according to which these kinds of conditions are relevant in determining the moral worth of judgments and actions, then it seems that possessing understanding will allow one to meet them.

Finally, we can generate the argument that moral testimony cannot put one in the epistemic position required for one's moral judgments or actions to have moral worth:

### **Fishy Testimony**

- (1) For any moral proposition  $p$ , for one's judgment that  $p$  or actions performed on the basis of  $p$  to have moral worth, one must understand (or, minimally, grasp) why  $p$  is true.
- (2) Testimony is not a source of moral understanding (or grasping).
- (3) Therefore, testimony cannot provide one with the epistemic relationship required for morally worthy action or judgment.

<sup>4</sup>For more about this type of conception of grasping, see Grimm (2006), Khalifa (2013), and Boyd (2017).

<sup>5</sup>I will restrict my discussion here to the -why form of understanding. There are plausibly others: understanding-how to do something (see Zagzebski [2008]) and understanding an object or phenomenon (see Kvanvig [2003], Wilkenfeld [2013], and Kelp [2015]) are most frequently discussed. I think these forms of understanding have enough in common that there is little consequence to focusing on one form rather than another (see Boyd [2017]); regardless, for the sake of ease of discussion, I will restrict my arguments to understanding-why.

Fishy Testimony, I will argue, is unsound. Above, we have seen reasons why one might think (1) is true, and I will continue to assume that it is true in what follows.<sup>6</sup> My primary target is (2): I will argue that (2) is false because it rests on the false assumption that testimony is a purely or at least predominantly deferential epistemic source. Note that the relevant problem here concerns testimony as a source and not merely as a cause. For instance, testimony might be a *cause* of understanding insofar as it provides one with knowledge which one then uses as a basis to derive new understanding; in this sense testimony is a potential cause of understanding but not a source of understanding.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, testimony might be a cause of understanding in the blunt sense in which understanding might simply result from being told something, in the same way that a smack upside the head might cause one's neurons to fire in such a way that they realize something they had not realized before. In this sense, testimony may again be a cause but not a source of understanding.

Instead, to say that testimony is a source of an epistemic or doxastic state is to say one's justification for being in such a state derives from the testimonial act itself. The details of how to spell this out, exactly, are a matter of significant debate within the epistemology of testimony. The two largest competing positions are *nonreductionism*—the view that testimony is a basic epistemic source akin to perception, memory, and inference—and *reductionism*—the view that testimony provides justification only insofar as one also possesses reasons to accept the content of the relevant testimony. I will remain agnostic with regards to this debate here; instead, I aim to show that while testimony has traditionally been conceived of as a source of justification and knowledge, we can broaden the discussion to include understanding, and moral understanding specifically. The relevant questions that we need to consider are, first, whether testimony can be a source of moral understanding in the way that it can be a source of other doxastic and epistemic states, and second, whether it can be a source of the kind of moral understanding that would allow one to be in the epistemic position required for one's actions and judgments to have moral worth. I argue that both of these questions should be answered in the affirmative, as long as we think of testimony a bit differently.

### 3. Cooperative testimony

To motivate the view that testimony can be a source of understanding why *p*, consider first in general terms how testimony can be a source of knowledge. First, you know that *p* (say<sup>8</sup>) and you tell me that *p*. We then say that your testimony is the source of my knowledge so long as some additional conditions are met: for example, I might need to trust that you know what you are talking about at least implicitly, and, perhaps, either possess reasons to believe you or lack reasons to disbelieve you. Minimally, I also have to rely on some background beliefs or concepts that allow me to properly interpret the content of what you are saying. This is not to say that coming to know that *p* on the basis of your testimony involves any significant cognitive effort or the implementation of any specialized abilities on my part as a recipient: I do not, say, need to explicitly go through a process of reasoning that concludes, from the basis of your trustworthiness, combined with facts surrounding *p*, etc., that I should accept *p*, and only thereby come to know that *p*. Furthermore, one's commitment to either

<sup>6</sup>Some have argued that (1) is false. Such arguments typically appeal to cases in which one has no better choice but to seek out moral testimony: for example, if one really has no idea what to do and time is of the essence, then it seems that what one really ought to do is seek out moral advice. For example, Markovits (2010) argues that in such cases knowledge acquired deferentially can act as a right-making reason (since one did what one took to be the best thing to do, namely seek out advice), while Enoch (2014) argues that seeking out advice in states of ignorance in general can provide one's actions with moral worth (since seeking out advice is the best of the available actions for someone in such circumstances). While I will not address these arguments here, I am sympathetic to Skarsaune's (2016) argument that in such cases the relevant testimony provides merely instrumental justification for one's actions. Regardless, the cases that I consider in what follows will not be of the type considered by Markovits and Enoch, namely those in which one had no other choice but to rely on testimony given their circumstances.

<sup>7</sup>I discuss the difference between testimony as a *source* and as a *basis* in more detail in section 4.

<sup>8</sup>There are open questions as to whether a speaker does, in fact, have to know that *p* in order for her testimony to be a source of knowledge for the recipient (see Lackey [2008]). Here, I will assume that such knowledge is necessary.

reductionism or nonreductionism will also bring along with it different requirements for the amount of cognitive work that a recipient needs to do: reductionists will require that one have done at least some cognitive work in the form of possessing reasons to believe that the testifier is trustworthy, while nonreductionists will not. Regardless of our general theoretical commitments, for testimony to be a source of knowledge the recipient has to do *something* herself, insofar as she has to make sense of the content of a speaker's testimony and conceive of the testifier or the content of her testimony in the right way.

As it has traditionally been conceived, what makes testimony unique as an epistemic source is that it is deferential, in the sense that the justification I have as a result of your testimony is due to the fact that *you told me so*: you have done the work of finding out whether *p*, and it is you that I appeal to as a basis for justification in my belief as opposed to any of my own faculties or cognitive work that I have done. It is also the deferential nature of testimony that seems to prevent it from being a source that can put one in an epistemic position required for one's actions to have full moral worth: as we have seen above, making judgments or acting on the basis of the cognitive work that someone else has done entails that one is judging or acting for reasons that one has not themselves considered. We can again see how the deferential nature of testimony both underlies the problem of moral testimony and motivates positing the requirement of understanding as a solution: if testimony is a deferential epistemic source, and deference is an obstacle to moral worth, then for one's beliefs and actions to fully exemplify moral worth they must derive from an epistemic state that is not acquired deferentially. As we have seen, understanding has been taken to be said state.

My proposal here is that we think of testimony not as a *purely* deferential source of doxastic and epistemic states. As a result, we remove the barriers both to saying that testimony cannot be a source of moral understanding, and that testimony cannot put one in an epistemic position that can underlie morally worthy beliefs and actions generally. Here is the idea: as we saw above, in order for testimony to provide one with knowledge, one's background cognitive states need to be involved in at least the minimal sense that one needs to employ (albeit not explicitly) a suite of background cognitive states in order to make sense of the content of said testimony. Reliance on testimony, then, is not in any case a matter of *pure deference*: for testimony to be purely deferential would mean that the *entirety* of the explanation and justification for one's doxastic or epistemic state is attributable to the cognitive work of the testifier. Since the cognitive states of a recipient necessarily play at least some role in their acquisition of the relevant doxastic or epistemic state, it is at least partially due to the cognitive work of the recipient themselves that they are said to have acquired said state. We should thus restate the deferential nature of testimony: testimony is deferential in the sense that when I acquire a doxastic or epistemic state concerning *p* on the basis of your testimony, the cognitive work that you did in figuring out that *p* plays a necessary and salient justificatory role in my acquisition of said state. At the same time, previous cognitive work that I have done also plays at least a small explanatory and justificatory role: that I have done prior cognitive work in forming beliefs that I, in the minimal case, use in interpreting the content of your testimony, means that at least part of the reason why I am justified in believing that *p* is that I have done said work.<sup>9</sup>

Again, depending on our conception of testimony (specifically, if we are reductionists), we might think that there is other cognitive work that I have to do in order to acquire a new doxastic or epistemic state on the basis of testimony: I might, for instance, have to have good reason to think that you are trustworthy. The kind of cognitive work on the part of the recipient that I have in mind here, however, pertains to the content of the testimony itself and not to the trustworthiness of the testifier. Regardless, then, of our views concerning the relationship that a recipient has to have with

<sup>9</sup>Note that this view is compatible with nonreductionist views of testimony in which it is a basic epistemic source, as well as views that state we have default or *a priori* reason to testimony: according to these views it is still an agent who possesses a suite of background beliefs and concepts that is entitled to rely on testimony, and thus an agent's justificatory status towards said relevant background beliefs and concepts will play a justifying role in their reliance on testimony.

the testifier, there will always be some minimal content-related cognitive work that the recipient has to perform when relying on testimony.<sup>10</sup>

Once we accept that testimony is not a *purely* deferential source, we can sketch a picture of how testimony can be a source of understanding. I will argue that the relevant difference between testimony as a source of knowledge and as a source of understanding will be the background cognitive states that a recipient relies on in coming to be in the relevant state: when it comes to knowledge, a recipient relies on some relevant background concepts and beliefs, whereas for understanding, one will need to rely on a relevant pre-existing relational structure. The idea, then, is the following: in some cases, a recipient will mentally represent a relational structure that consists of beliefs and reasons that are closely related to the content of some new testimony. Testimony can then provide one with new information that she can “slot in” to those pre-existing relational structures, resulting in the acquisition of new understanding.<sup>11</sup>

Examples will be helpful. Consider two cases in which testimony can be a source of moral understanding in the way I am describing here:

*Don't Hit Your Brother:* Siblings Sarah, Robert, and Tabitha are playing together when an argument breaks out over who is next entitled to play with the most desirable toy. Sarah knows that it is wrong to use physical force in order to win an argument with her sister: she recognizes that, by doing so, Tabitha will experience pain, and that causing her pain is not a good thing to do. Sarah has not, however, considered the potential suffering of her brother. Not realizing that she is doing anything wrong, she hits her brother, causing him to cry and relinquish the toy. Sarah is quickly chastised by her mother, who tells her, “It’s just as wrong to hit your brother as it is to hit your sister.”

*Don't Eat Cuttlefish:* Sascha believes that it’s wrong to eat intelligent creatures because the value of the lives of intelligent creatures outweighs the value of any pleasure that he would experience by eating them. While at a restaurant with his sister Audrey, he orders the cuttlefish. Audrey is surprised, but then realizes that Sascha perhaps does not know that cuttlefish are intelligent creatures. Audrey tells Sascha, “You shouldn’t eat cuttlefish, they’re really smart.”

Here is how I propose we interpret these cases: in *Don't Hit Your Brother*, Sarah’s mother’s testimony is the source of Sarah’s understanding of why she should not hit her brother. Since Sarah already possesses a grasp of the relevant reasons pertaining to closely related information, namely why it is wrong to hit her *sister*, she then already mentally represents a relational structure consisting of reasons pertaining to pain that her sister would feel and the wrongness of causing unnecessary suffering, reasons that equally well support the fact that she should not hit her brother. As a result of listening to her mother’s testimony, then, Sarah can rely on those relational structures that she already mentally represents, and into which she can slot new information regarding the fact that she should not hit her brother, resulting in new understanding of why she should not hit her brother. Similarly, in *Don't Eat Cuttlefish*, Audrey’s testimony is the source of Sascha’s understanding why he should not eat cuttlefish. Since Sascha already mentally represents a relational structure pertaining to the reasons why it is wrong to eat intelligent creatures, Audrey’s testimony provides him with new information that he is able to slot into this structure, resulting in a new understanding of why he should not eat them. Additionally, in both cases the resulting understanding is testimonial since, first, neither Sarah nor Sascha would have had the relevant understanding were it not for the cognitive work done by the respective testifiers, and second, because the relevant testimony plays not only a causal but a justificatory role in their resulting understanding.

<sup>10</sup>I should note here that these claims about the nature of testimony are not restricted to those in which one relies on testimony as a source of understanding. Rather, it is a general claim about testimony that, while it is always deferential, it is never *purely* deferential in the way I am describing it here.

<sup>11</sup>For a general version of a similar type of view, see Boyd (2017).

Consider, for example, what would happen if Sarah were to come to distrust her mother as a source a good moral advice: in such a case, she would cease to hold beliefs that she formed on the basis of her mother's testimony, including those regarding hitting her brother. In losing these beliefs, Sarah would then fail to represent the kind of mental structure that would constitute her understanding of why it is wrong to hit her brother. Thus, even though Sarah's understanding results from the information she acquired via her mother's testimony being integrated with her pre-existing relational structures, once Sarah no longer relies on her mother's justification, she loses her understanding.<sup>12</sup>

You may not want to interpret these cases in the same way that I am here (although I think you should); I consider a number of objections to these cases in section 4. In the meantime, consider the following general picture of how testimony can be a source of moral understanding:

*Testimonial understanding*: when *S* testifies to *R* that moral proposition *p* because *q*, and (i) *R* grasps a relational structure composed of related proposition *p'* and reasons why *p'* (reasons that might include *q* or reasons closely related to *q*); and (ii) *R* conceives of *S* as trustworthy, either implicitly or explicitly; then *S*'s testimony is the source of *R*'s understanding why *p*.

I will not say anything detailed about what it means for propositions and reasons to be "closely related," but a few general remarks will make the above view a bit clearer. Sometimes the reasons one already possesses can also support a new belief—this is what happens in *Don't Eat Cuttlefish*, in which the reasons Sascha possesses that support a belief that it is wrong to eat intelligent creatures generally are the same as those that support a belief that it is wrong to eat cuttlefish in particular—and sometimes they are merely related, as in *Don't Hit Your Brother*, in which the reasons that Sarah has are all directed towards her sister, but are equally applicable to her brother. I take it, though, that the reasons Sarah possesses are too far removed from, say, the fact that it is wrong to lie to her brother to make it the case that testimony could be a source of understanding why this is true; similarly, Sascha's reasons are likely too far removed from reasons pertaining to why he ought to adopt animals, as opposed to buying them from a breeder, for testimony to be a source of the relevant understanding for him. These cases are clearest because they lie at the ends of a spectrum; there will no doubt be grey areas in which it will be unclear whether one's reasons are closely related enough to the content of some new testimony such that said testimony can be a source of understanding. In the following, I will avoid grey areas as much as possible.

We have seen that the background cognitive states of a recipient must in some small way be included as part of the explanation for how testimony can be a source of one's knowledge. In *Don't Hit Your Brother* and *Don't Eat Cuttlefish*, however, the recipient's background cognitive states play a much more significant role in how the recipient acquired their understanding: indeed, it seems that Sarah and Sascha need to have done a lot more cognitive work in order to acquire understanding on the basis of the respective instances of testimony. This does not mean, however, that we should think that in these cases testimony is not the source of understanding. Rather, these cases indicate that the extent to which testimony qualifies as a deferential source of epistemic or doxastic states comes in degrees.

To illustrate, consider how testimony can be more or less deferential as a source of knowledge. First, consider cases of what Lackey (2011) calls "isolated second-hand knowledge," in which testimony is the source of one's knowledge that *p*, but one possesses no other beliefs closely related to *p*. For example, if I know absolutely nothing about Frida Kahlo, but you tell me she died in 1954, your testimony can be the source of my knowledge of this fact even if it constitutes the entirety of my knowledge about Frida Kahlo. This case is one in which testimony is most deferential, since the fact that you told me so constitutes almost the entirety of my justification (although not the entirety since, as argued above, no instance of testimony is purely deferential). However, perhaps I am instead a knowledgeable fan of Frida Kahlo and, knowing that I will be excited to hear the news, you tell me that a previously unknown painting of hers was recently discovered. In this case, your

<sup>12</sup>Thanks to an anonymous editor for suggesting this line of argument.



testimony provides me with knowledge that is not at all isolated for me because my cognitive world is populated by numerous other beliefs about Kahlo and her works. As a result, the information you provide me with will be interpreted differently than, say, someone who had never heard of Kahlo and knew nothing about art history. For instance, your testimony provides me not only with knowledge of the fact that a previously unknown painting of hers has been discovered, but also knowledge that a new significant detail of Kahlo's life has been discovered. When I receive testimony that  $p$  about a subject for which I possess many background beliefs and knowledge, then, your testimony can provide me with more knowledge than the bare fact that  $p$ . In such cases, my own beliefs and knowledge are part of the explanation as to how it is that I now have the new knowledge that I do.

We can now make a distinction between cases of testimony that are *predominantly deferential*, and ones that are *cooperative*. Call cases of testimony *cooperative* just in case, along with the testimony itself, the pre-existing cognitive states of the recipient play a significant explanatory and justificatory role in the recipient coming to be in the relevant new doxastic or epistemic state; call cases of testimony *predominantly deferential* just in case the cognitive states of the recipient play a small role, although not a significant one. Cooperative testimony is cooperative in the sense that the cognitive work that both the testifier and recipient have done with regard to the *content* of said testimony are relevant in explaining and justifying how the recipient came to be in the relevant doxastic or epistemic state. It is not cooperative in the sense that it requires the recipient to actively or intentionally apply any background cognitive states they have in order to acquire new doxastic or epistemic states, nor in the sense that the testifier needs to intentionally attempt to appeal to the cognitive states of the recipient.

This is not to say that a testifier cannot attempt to be actively cooperative; indeed, many cases of testimony will be ones which a testifier assumes that the recipient has already performed some relevant cognitive work. Consider, for example, cases in which an expert testifies to another in the same field of expertise:

*Expert Physicists:* Jonas and Finn are accomplished physicists, and Jonas has finished reading a complex paper in astrophysics. Finn wants to know what the paper is about, so Jonas tells him that the paper attempts to “derive a dual description of eternal inflation in terms of a deformed Euclidean CFG located at the threshold of eternal inflation.”<sup>13</sup> As an expert in astrophysics himself, Finn has no problems interpreting the information that Jonas tells him, and thus has no difficulty with coming to know what the paper is about.

There is clearly a sense here in which Finn's knowledge is deferential: he knows what the paper is about because Jonas told him.<sup>14</sup> But there is also clearly a sense in which Finn's background cognitive states plays an important explanatory and justificatory role in how he acquired that knowledge: for someone who knew very little about physics, for instance, Jonas's testimony would not result in the acquisition of the same knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>This example is taken from the abstract of Hawking and Hertog (2018), chosen because I read about it in the news and had no idea what it was about.

<sup>14</sup>Is it the case that Jonas's testimony could provide a complete layperson with the relevant knowledge? There is debate concerning the extent to which one can *semantically* defer such that one can still acquire knowledge from testimony even though one might not know what some of the terms involved in the content of that testimony mean (see Goldberg [2009]). Without addressing the debate in detail, it seems that, for a layperson, the lack of relevant concepts in *Expert Physicists* is too significant of an obstacle to acquiring knowledge.

<sup>15</sup>Sliwa (2017, 535) presents a similar case: she argues that the quantity of knowledge that one has depends on how many possibilities one can eliminate, and thus that an instance of testimony can provide different recipients with different amounts of knowledge, as the same testimony can allow subjects to eliminate different possibilities depending on their background knowledge and expertise. I am sympathetic to Sliwa's conclusions although I believe our views diverge in an important way: given the way that Sliwa presents her case, it is not clear that she takes the background knowledge and expertise of a subject to play a *justificatory* role in the acquisition of knowledge via testimony. Rather, it seems that a recipient's cognitive situation serves as a precondition for how much knowledge she can acquire via testimony. If this is so, then Sliwa is not defending a conception of testimony that is cooperative in the sense I am defending here.

With the distinction between cooperative and predominantly deferential testimony in hand, the guiding idea is that the fact that coming to understand why  $p$  is true depends on one having done some cognitive work with regards to  $p$  or related propositions does not preclude testimony from being a source of one's understanding. The phenomenon I have in mind here is, I think, commonplace, despite all of the various bits of machinery I have used to describe it. For example, in an attempt to pass on new understanding to one's students, a teacher will often appeal to related notions that the students understand already, in the hope that they can exploit that understanding in order to understand something new. Undoubtedly, this process will sometimes require students to explicitly reason by analogy to acquire new understanding. In other cases, however, no such explicit reasoning will be required and students will just "get it." According to the arguments I have provided here, this can occur when testimony is cooperative: the teacher has provided information that students can slot into pre-existing relational structures, thus resulting in a new instance of understanding. In this sense we can say quite literally that teachers can provide their students with understanding.

Here is a lingering worry with the view that I have defended thus far: even if testimony can be a source of moral understanding, the whole point in positing that moral understanding is what is required for one to be in the epistemic position necessary for one's judgments and actions to have moral worth was that understanding is something that one has to acquire for oneself. Perhaps, then, we have only pushed the problem back a step: what morality requires might not be just that one has understanding, but instead that the understanding one has has been worked out for themselves, and *this* is not something that testimony can provide one with.

Consider, for example, Nickel's (2001) argument that for judgments and actions to have moral worth they cannot be justified *interpersonally*. Nickel provides an example: my friend asks me for a loan since he needs to pay rent, but I am justifiably worried that he will use the money for drugs instead. Not sure about what to do, I ask my mother, who tells me that I should only lend him the money once he has gotten his life together. As Nickel argues, if my friend asks me why I decided not to lend him the money, "because my mother told me so" is hardly a satisfying explanation. Indeed, it seems that in such a case I should not be deferring my judgment to my mother, regardless of whether she generally happens to give good advice.<sup>16</sup> Whenever we rely on testimony, then, the reasons that we appeal to in order to justify our judgments and actions will involve the fact that someone else said so. Nickel attempts to illustrate with his case that, when it comes to moral matters, this does not seem good enough to give those judgments and actions moral worth: it should be *me* who is the *author* of my moral judgments that serve as the basis for my decision, not my mother.

Is testimony incompatible with this kind of self-authorship? That depends: if we are asking whether self-authorship is incompatible with predominantly deferential testimony, then the answer appears to be "yes." In these cases, we come to (for example) know something because the testifier has done the work themselves to acquire that knowledge, and our own cognitive states play very little role in how we acquired it. In cooperative cases, however, recipients of testimony are more properly identified as at least *an* author of their knowledge, as their cognitive states play a significant explanatory role in their acquisition of that knowledge. Relying on testimony does entail that one's justification for one's judgments or actions is interpersonal: again, in justifying his decision to stop eating cuttlefish, Sascha will rely on whatever justification Audrey had for believing that one should not eat cuttlefish and, in justifying her decision to stop hitting her brother, Sarah will rely on whatever justification her mother had for believing that her brother ought to be perceived as an agent capable of feeling pain. But this is not to say that Sascha or Sarah's justification is *entirely* interpersonal: Sascha is justified in part because of his own reasons that he possesses with regards to

<sup>16</sup>There are related questions here concerning whether it is appropriate to defer to moral experts, as well as whether there are moral experts at all. Here I will assume that, in Nickel's case, the mother in question is generally a reliable source of good advice, although not someone we would call a moral expert per se.

the moral status of intelligent creatures in general, and Sarah is justified in part because of her own reasons that she possesses with regards to the moral status of her sister. If judgments and actions require self-authorship of the epistemic and doxastic states that underlie them to have moral worth, then one can meet this requirement by relying on cooperative testimony.

We might not think it sufficient, though, that Sascha be *an* author of his own understanding: perhaps he has to be the *sole*, or at least the *primary*, author of his moral understanding in order for his judgments and actions to have moral worth. If this is the case, then testimony would again not be up to the task. There is good reason to think, though, that this requirement is too demanding. First, we will have invariably relied on someone else's cognitive work at some point when forming our moral beliefs, no doubt as a result of relying on the testimony of family and peers. That we are not hermits forming beliefs on the basis of self-derived first principles entails that we will only rarely be the *sole* author of our moral beliefs, knowledge, and understanding. Second, it is not clear how we could determine the proper allocation of cognitive work needed for moral worth: it seems hard to defend the view, say, that only doing 49 percent of the cognitive work in coming to understanding why something is true means that one has just missed the cut-off for moral worth. Regardless, it is only in cases like Nickel's, in which one is relying on predominantly deferential testimony, that the problem of self-authorship seems to arise.

While I have presented a theory that shows how cooperative testimony can be a source of understanding, one might think a much simpler theory exists. To see what this theory is, consider one more distinction—that between *reductionism* and *non-reductionism* in theories of understanding.<sup>17</sup> According to reductionism, understanding is just a species of knowledge. Understanding-why *p*, then, would consist in knowing a series of propositions, including *p* itself, reasons that support *p*, and perhaps propositions expressing the relationship between *p* and those reasons (for example, see Sliwa [2015], Riaz [2015], and Kelp [2014]). According to nonreductionism, understanding constitutes a distinct epistemic state, and thus there is no way that it can be reduced to knowledge (for example, see Kvanvig [2003]; Pritchard, Miller, and Haddock [2010]; Morris [2012]; and Hills [2015])<sup>18</sup>.

It might seem that the reductionist has an easy way to account for how testimony can be a source of understanding: if understanding is a kind of knowledge, and testimony is a source of knowledge, then so too, can it be a source of understanding. The problem with this argument, however, is that we then face a problem of moral worth: since one can acquire knowledge from predominantly deferential testimony, then one will also be able to acquire understanding in the same way. As we have seen, however, one reason why understanding was taken to be the epistemic basis required for one's judgments and actions to have moral worth was because it is an epistemic state that is necessarily a product of the work one has done in figuring the truth of, and supporting reasons for, a relevant proposition. The worry for the reductionist is that when predominantly deferential testimony is a source of understanding, then such understanding will not be able to provide the right kind of epistemic basis necessary for morally worthy judgments and actions. Mogensen (2015, 7), for example, presents this worry as follows:

Firstly, a little imagination puts a question-mark over the claim that understanding can't be conveyed by testimony. Danielle's friend might tell her not simply that the war is unjust but also why this is so, and Danielle might trust her on this point. In doing so, she doesn't seem to make her dependence on her friend's moral views any less problematic.

<sup>17</sup>Note this this debate is distinct from that discussed above concerning theories of testimony.

<sup>18</sup>Note how the sketch of understanding that I presented above—namely that involving the grasp of a relational structure consisting of *p* and reasons why *p*—is neutral to this debate. This is because we could spell out all of the aforementioned components in terms of instances of other doxastic and epistemic states: the reductionist could interpret a relational structure as a set of instances of knowledge or belief, and the grasping relation as knowledge of another proposition, namely one expressing how the parts of that structure relate to one another. The nonreductionist would analyze these components differently, perhaps with a relational structure constituting a kind of mental representation that is different from a belief in a proposition, and with grasping representing a distinct kind mental relationship.

If Danielle can come to understand solely by relying on her friend's testimony—testimony that includes not only the fact that  $p$  but all the relevant reasons for  $p$  and the relations between them that are required for understanding—then it is hard to see how Danielle is in an epistemic position that can underlie morally worthy judgments and actions. Mogensen's example is a quintessential case of predominantly deferential testimony: it is the fact that Danielle's own cognitive states played almost no role in the acquisition of her understanding that makes her reliance on her friend's testimony problematic.

But again, this is a problem for the reductionist only in cases in which testimony is predominantly deferential. Indeed, we can solve the above problem for the reductionist if we accept that testimony can be cooperative. As we have seen, the reductionist holds the view that understanding why  $p$  will involve knowing  $p$  and reasons that support  $p$ . So how can one come to acquire understanding on the basis of testimony? One way is for testimony to provide one with all the knowledge that one needs for understanding, say the fact the  $p$  and all the reasons why  $p$ . But it is more likely that an instance of testimony does not provide one with *all* the relevant knowledge required for understanding but, instead, merely *some* of it. For instance, consider how Sliwa (2017) illustrates a way in which testimony can provide one with reductionist understanding. The case involves two friends: Mary, who understands why eating meat is morally wrong, and Eleanor, who merely knows that eating meat is morally wrong.<sup>19</sup> If we are nonreductionists, we will think that the relevant epistemic difference between Mary and Eleanor is constituted by a difference in type of mental state: the difference might be constituted by an extra condition that Mary meets that Eleanor fails to, perhaps that Mary not only knows the relevant facts, but also grasps them and the relevant relationships between them. If we are reductionists, though, the difference between Mary and Eleanor is a difference of knowledge—namely that Mary knows some crucial reasons why eating meat is wrong that Eleanor does not. If Eleanor were to acquire this additional knowledge, then she would be on an epistemic par with Mary; thus Mary could tell Eleanor what those reasons are and, as a result, Eleanor would also understand why eating meat is wrong. On a reductionist view of understanding, then, the reasons that Eleanor already possessed would play a justificatory role in her acquisition of understanding. We can only say, then, that Mary's testimony is a source of Eleanor's understanding if we conceive of Mary's testimony as cooperative.<sup>20</sup>

If cooperative testimony can be a source of understanding, then there is nothing in-principle fishy with moral testimony: if moral understanding is required for one's judgments and actions to have moral worth, then it is indeed possible for testimony to be a source of said understanding. What is most fishy about moral testimony, then, seems to involve cases in which said testimony is predominantly deferential. Again, this seems to be the problem with cases like *Suit*: what is problematic about Sam's reliance on testimony is that, because he lacked any of the relevant background cognitive states that we would expect an adult to possess, he cannot help but rely on predominantly deferential testimony and, as such, said testimony cannot provide him with the relevant understanding. Sam's case does not, then, provide a case that shows that there is anything fishy about relying on moral testimony in general, but rather that there may be something fishy about relying on predominantly deferential moral testimony in particular.

In the next section I consider two objections to the view that cooperative testimony can be a source of moral understanding that meets the demands of moral worth. The first concerns whether we should really think that cases of cooperative moral testimony are ones in which testimony is the

<sup>19</sup>This example continues the assumption that it is in fact true that eating meat is morally wrong.

<sup>20</sup>Again, note how the view I am defending here differs from Sliwa's: in Sliwa's reductionist view, one can acquire understanding on the basis of testimony since the difference between knowing that  $p$  and understanding-why  $p$  is simply a quantity of knowledge, knowledge that can be acquired via testimony. As I am agnostic as to whether understanding is a type of knowledge, my view is more general: it allows us to account for testimonial understanding even if understanding is taken to be a *sui generis* epistemic state.

source, as opposed to merely the basis, of moral understanding; the second considers whether the cases *Don't Hit Your Brother* and *Don't Eat Cuttlefish* are cases of moral, as opposed to empirical, testimony.

#### 4. Moral testimony and moral testimony

To set the stage for the first two objections I will consider here, we first need to note that there are two possible ways that testimony can play a role in forming a doxastic or epistemic relationship with a moral proposition: we might know that  $p$  is wrong, say, because someone told us that  $p$  is wrong; or we might know that  $p$  is wrong on the basis of drawing the conclusion that it is wrong after being provided with relevant information regarding  $p$ . For example, if a coworker tells me that, due to poor working conditions for employees elsewhere within the company, it is my moral obligation to join the union, then my coworker's testimony is the source of my knowledge of my obligation. However, if my coworker simply tells me about those poor working conditions, then while I can know that these conditions obtain as a result of my coworker's testimony, if I then come to know that I am morally obligated to join the union, I will have to do so on my own. I rely on my coworker's testimony as a basis for knowledge such that I then employ an inference but, in this case, it will be inference that is the source of my knowledge, not testimony. With this distinction in mind, one might think that cases I have presented that purport to show how testimony can be a *source* of moral understanding are actually cases in which testimony serves merely as a *basis* upon which one could infer to moral understanding.

This distinction between testimony as a *source* and as a *basis* is not always kept clear in discussions of moral testimony. Consider the following from Sliwa (2012, 192–93):

In fact, testimony may sometimes be necessary in order to achieve moral understanding. This is no different in the moral case than in nonmoral cases. We value not just moral but also, for example, scientific understanding. And while testimony may not always be sufficient to acquire understanding of physics, testimony is nevertheless crucial—for example through textbooks and lectures.

Here Sliwa seems to also be describing cases in which one can acquire understanding on a *basis* of beliefs and knowledge that testimony provides, but not in which testimony is a source of understanding. We can all agree that testimony can be a perfectly good basis upon which one could then go on to acquire moral understanding; the problem with moral testimony lies in the possibility of testimony being a source of understanding. I have attempted to show here that testimony can be a source of understanding when testimony is cooperative. But there may be lingering worries that even in cooperative cases testimony only provides one with a basis for understanding and not understanding itself.

Again, consider *Don't Eat Cuttlefish*. In this case, Sascha acquires new understanding and Audrey's testimony is involved. But in what way? We might think that what's really going on is that as a result of Audrey's testimony, Sascha gains new knowledge about cuttlefish, and then draws upon other knowledge and understanding that he already possesses—say, about the moral status of intelligent animals—finally concluding that he should apply the same considerations that he gives to other animals to cuttlefish, as well. As a result of this process, Sascha acquires understanding, but it is understanding that derives from Audrey's testimony as a basis, not a source. Similarly, one might think that in *Don't Hit Your Brother* Sarah forms a new belief with regards to whether she should hit her brother, but only comes to understand why she shouldn't on the basis of an inference, namely one that she performs on the basis of her mother's testimony combined with the reasons that she already possesses with regards to her sister.

However, the worry that in these cases testimony serves only as a basis and not as a source of moral understanding is again predicated on a view in which all instances of testimony must be

predominantly deferential. According to such a view, in determining what testimony is a source of, exactly, we need to look to the doxastic or epistemic states one forms, the explanation for which is based entirely on the cognitive work of the testifier. In this view, then, the *Don't Eat Cuttlefish* testimony can only serve as a source of knowledge about the intelligence of cuttlefish, and the *Don't Hit Your Brother* testimony can only serve as a source of knowledge that Sarah shouldn't hit her brother, and any understanding that the respective subjects acquire must come from an additional inference, not the testimony itself. As I have argued here, however, the fact that a subject's own cognitive states play a justificatory role in their coming to acquire a new doxastic or epistemic state does not preclude testimony from being the source of such a state. The mere fact, then, that both Sascha's and Sarah's background cognitive states play such a role in their acquiring understanding does not entail that the respective instances of testimony are not the sources of their respective understanding.

Relatedly, one might worry that in the central cases I have described here that the relevant testimony is merely a *cause* of the relevant understanding, and not a source of it.<sup>21</sup> Consider an example: a logic student making no headway on proving De Morgan's theorems asks his professor for help. The professor tells the student that "perhaps a proof by *reductio* would be worth considering." As a result, the student is able to derive the proof, and comes to understand why De Morgan's theorems are true. In this case, we would not say that the professor's testimony was a *source* of the student's understanding, but instead that it was a cause, albeit in a sense different from the brute cause discussed earlier (i.e., it does not cause understanding in the way that a smack upside the head might) or as a basis in the sense described here (i.e., the student does not employ the content of the professor's testimony as a premise in an inference). We might then be concerned that the testimony involved in Sarah and Audrey's cases are both causes of understanding in this sense.

But again, in the central cases testimony does not serve in a merely causal capacity, either. This is because while in both the De Morgan case and the central cases testimony plays a necessary role in the respective subjects' acquisition of understanding—they would not have acquired understanding without it—in the central cases the respective instances of testimony play a justificatory role. Again, in Sarah's case she relies on the cognitive work that her mother did in coming to determine that it's wrong for Sarah to hit her brother, and it is this reliance that plays a necessary justificatory role in her acquisition of understanding why it is wrong to hit her brother. On the other hand, the professor's cognitive work does not play a justificatory role in the student coming to acquire their understanding: had the professor been not paying attention to her student's concerns and was merely saying the first thing that came to mind, or if a fellow student who was terrible at logic had suggested the same course of action, the student would have come to understand De Morgan's equally well. Furthermore, if the student were to stop trusting his professor, he would not lose his understanding of why De Morgan's theorems are true; this indicates that the professor's testimony does not play a justificatory role in the student's acquisition of understanding.

The second main objection I will consider here is related to the first: one might think that even if testimony is the source of Sascha and Sarah's respective understanding, it is perhaps not *moral* testimony that is such a source. This objection is perhaps most pressing in the *Don't Eat Cuttlefish* case: we might worry here that Audrey's testimony is really *empirical* in nature, as she makes an empirical claim about the intelligence of cuttlefish. If Audrey's testimony is the source of Sascha's understanding, the worry goes, it is not *moral* testimony. I think that we should resist this worry. Audrey's testimony clearly involves a moral claim, namely that Sascha is morally required not to eat cuttlefish, a claim that she backs up with an empirical claim about their intelligence. If Audrey and Sascha were simply having a conversation about the intelligence of sea creatures, then any moral conclusions that Sascha drew from such a conversation would not be the result of *moral* testimony. But Audrey is making no mere empirical claim. Rather, Audrey is attempting to make her testimony

<sup>21</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee and editor for raising this objection.

cooperative: since she knows that Sascha already possesses relational structures pertaining to the reasons why one should not eat intelligent creatures for gustatory pleasure, she is able to testify in such a way that exploits those structures. Again, if we think of Audrey's testimony as being cooperative, then there is no reason to think that Audrey's testimony is not the source of Sascha's understanding.

## 5. Conclusion

If there is any problem with moral testimony it is a problem not with testimony itself, but with deference. This can be seen in the types of cases that are generally appealed in order to illustrate the problem of moral testimony: the most problematic cases of moral testimony are ones in which a recipient's knowledge is isolated, such as in the *Suit* case with which we started, and so depends entirely on the cognitive work of the testifier. The main argument that I have addressed here is one that posits that testimony cannot put one in the epistemic position required for one's relevant judgments and actions to have moral worth because morally worthy judgments and actions require understanding, and testimony cannot be a source of moral understanding. Conceiving of testimony as not simply a purely deferential epistemic source addresses this worry on two fronts: it allows us to see how testimony can be a source not only of moral understanding, but of moral understanding that is not predominantly deferential, thus allowing it to meet the conditions necessary for morally worth judgments and actions.

**Acknowledgments.** Many thanks to two anonymous referees and an editor for their helpful comments and suggestions. My thanks as well to audiences that commented on earlier versions of this paper, specifically those at the Canadian Philosophical Association 2018 meeting and members of DePauw University and the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

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