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A defense of the very idea of moral deference pessimism

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Abstract Pessimists think that there is something wrong with relying on deference for one's moral beliefs—at least if one is morally mature. Call this NO DEFERENCE. They also tend to think that what explains our aversion to cases of moral deference is the fact that they involve deference about *moral* claims. Call this MORAL EXPLANATION. Recently, both NO DEFERENCE and MORAL EXPLANATION have come under attack. Against NO DEFERENCE, some philosophers offer purported counterexamples involving moral advice. I argue that proponents of this objection face a trilemma depending on how they spell out the details of their counterexamples. Against MORAL EXPLANATION, some philosophers offer debunking explanations of our aversion to moral deference. They present cases of non-moral deference that are troubling and argue that the feature that explains our aversion to this non-moral deference also explains our aversion to moral deference. I argue that none of these explanations (nor their conjunction) can explain all troubling cases of moral deference and that they face objections of their own. I conclude that we should be optimistic about the prospects of moral deference pessimism.

Keywords Moral testimony · Moral deference · Moral advice · Pessimism · Moral epistemology

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1 Introduction

Consider the following case:

> **Vegetarian:** Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.[1]

Many think that Eleanor does something off-putting by deferring to her friend's moral judgment.[2]

In response to cases like Vegetarian, many philosophers have become *pessimists* about moral deference.[3] Pessimists, as I will understand them, endorse the following theses[4]:

> NO DEFERENCE: For a mature moral agent, there is something wrong with relying on deference for one's moral beliefs even if one knows one's source to be reliable and trustworthy.[5]
>
> MORAL EXPLANATION: Our intuitive aversion to moral deference is explained by the fact it involves deference about moral claims.

What exactly is meant by "wrong," is often not spelled out. It might mean that it is morally wrong, epistemically wrong, or perhaps morally or epistemically bad.[6]

For years, pessimism about moral deference was the default position.[7] Recently, however, the tides have turned and pessimism has come under sustained attack. Some of these challenges target specific defenses of pessimism, i.e., they target the explanation of *what* authors claim is wrong or bad about moral deference or *what* some claim explains why we find moral deference off-putting. However, some of these challenges target *the very idea* of pessimism.[8] That is, they attack the very idea that there is (or could be) something wrong with moral deference or that what

[1] Hills (2009), 94.

[2] I will use "moral testimony" and "moral deference" interchangeably. I think there is an important difference between the two, but it does not matter for our purposes here. For a discussion of this distinction, see: Lewis (manuscript). I will also use "relying on" and "deferring" interchangeably.

[3] Pessimists include: Nickel (2001), Driver (2006), Hopkins (2007), McGrath (2009 and 2011), Hills (2009, 2011, and 2013), Crisp (2014).

[4] The term "pessimist" was introduced in the moral testimony literature by Hopkins (2007).

[5] NO DEFERENCE is a broader version of a claim that Sliwa (2012) calls NO TESTIMONY (176).

[6] To be clear, one can endorse NO DEFERENCE without also endorsing MORAL EXPLANATION—and vice versa.

[7] The earliest work explicitly on moral testimony includes: Nickel (2001), Driver (2006), Hopkins (2007), Hills (2009), and McGrath (2009 and 2011).

[8] For criticisms of particular pessimistic accounts, see: Sliwa (2012), Lackey (2013), Groll and Decker (2014), Enoch (2014), Howell (2014), Fletcher (2016), Mogensen (2017), Hazlett (2017), Lord (2018), and McShane (2018). For criticism of pessimism in general, see: Sliwa (2012), Groll and Decker (2014), Enoch (2014), and Davia and Palmira (2015).

explains our intuitive aversion to certain cases is that they are cases of moral deference.

In this paper, I consider two challenges to the very idea of pessimism. First, some object to NO DEFERENCE on the grounds that there are cases of moral advice that are not troubling at all and thus either: (a) it's false that there is something wrong with *all* cases of relying on moral deference as NO DEFERENCE entails or (b) there is nothing wrong with *any* cases of relying on moral deference. I argue that proponents of this challenge face a trilemma depending upon how they fill in the details of what is involved in moral advice. Second, some object to MORAL EXPLANATION by presenting debunking explanations, i.e., explanations of our aversion to moral deference that do not rely on the fact that the content of the deference is moral.[9] I argue that none of the debunking explanations (nor their conjunction) can account for all the troubling cases of relying on moral deference.

These challenges to the very idea of pessimism are especially pressing because if there is some reason to reject the very idea of pessimism, then, *a fortiori*, there is some reason to reject any particular account of pessimism. Answering these challenges thus reveals what a minimal version of pessimism needs to look like to be plausible.

2 Against NO DEFERENCE

Recall that according to NO DEFERENCE: For a mature moral agent, there is something wrong with relying on deference for one's moral beliefs even if one knows one's source to be reliable and trustworthy. One way to question NO DEFERENCE is to notice that some of the cases that are used to motivate pessimism are unusual or uncommon.[10] For example, they involve deferring about the moral permissibility of eating meat or the death penalty when the answer is not immediately practically important. But when we normally ask for another's moral judgments, we're asking for *advice* about what we should do *at that time* or in the near future. That is, we're in cases like the following:

> **Wedding:** Tom and Sara are planning a wedding and both of their families have offered to contribute money towards it. Sara's family, which is less wealthy than Tom's, offered a certain sum, which will cover less than half of the expenses. The couple is now wondering whether it would be permissible for them to ask Tom's family (which is wealthier) for a greater contribution. In particular, they worry that it wouldn't be fair of them to ask one set of parents for more. They decide to ask a friend whose judgment they trust.[11]

> **Trip:** Anna is a journalist who is preparing to go on a reporting trip to a dangerous and conflict-ridden area. She has to tell her family that she will be

[9] For example, see: Sliwa (2012), Groll and Decker (2014), and Davia and Palmira (2015).

[10] This is the strategy of Sliwa (2012) and Wiland (2014).

[11] Sliwa (2012): 177.

> away but she really doesn't know what to tell them. If she tells them where exactly she's going and why, they will be extremely worried. On the other hand, she worries that by evading the questions she would be lying. She goes back and forth but cannot decide what the right thing to do is and eventually decides to ask a friend whose judgment she trusts.[12]

There doesn't seem to be anything problematic about relying on a friend's judgment in these cases (at least as they are described). In fact, we seem to ask for such advice all the time.

Moreover, when we do ask for moral advice, we're usually not asking what moral considerations are relevant, but rather how they weigh up. For example:

> **Capital Punishment:** Eric and Sarah are both well-educated and mature moral agents. However, they disagree about whether capital punishment is wrong. They agree on all the non-moral information that is relevant to the moral status of capital punishment. They also agree about what the relevant moral considerations are. In particular, they agree that the following are the only two morally relevant considerations: (1) the fact that capital punishment deters would-be murderers grounds a *pro tanto* moral duty to execute murderers and (2) the fact that some innocent people are mistakenly executed grounds a *pro tanto* moral duty to not execute murderers. What Eric and Sarah disagree about is which *pro tanto* moral duty is stronger and thus they disagree about the balance of moral reasons. Eric believes that Sarah can weigh up the *pro tanto* moral duties better than he can and so he defers to her view about the morality of capital punishment.[13]

One might think that there is nothing particularly off-putting about this case given that it concerns only how to weigh moral duties.

Critics of pessimism think that these cases provide counterexamples to NO DEFERENCE. Call this the Moral Advice Objection. There are two ways to interpret this objection. According to the weak version of the objection, these cases show that not *all* cases of moral deference are *pro tanto* wrong.[14] However, it might still be true that some cases of moral deference are. Thus, there might be some difference between the above cases and the cases to which pessimists appeal. According to the strong version of this objection, there is no relevant difference between the deference exhibited in the above cases and moral deference in general and so *no* cases of moral deference are *pro tanto* wrong.[15]

Fortunately for pessimists, the Moral Advice Objection faces a trilemma. There are three plausible ways to spell out the details of the above cases. These interpretations differ along the following dimensions. First, the *amount* that a person defers (fully or partly) or *how much* she relies on moral deference or moral advice.

[12] Sliwa (2012), 178.

[13] This case is based on one in Wiland (2014) (172). He also thinks that deference in cases like these, in which *pro tanto* moral reasons must be weighed against each other, are not intuitively troubling (172).

[14] This seems to be what Wiland (2014) has in mind.

[15] I think this is the best interpretation of Sliwa (2012).

Second, the *kind* of deference, i.e., whether the deferrer *accepted* that *p* or formed the *belief* that *p* on the basis of deference. Third, the *length* of the deference (definite or indefinite), which normally corresponds to whether one accepts or believes on the basis of deference. Fourth, the *degree* of deference, i.e., how much of a change in belief or credence occurs because of the deference.

Here are the most plausible ways of interpreting what is involved in relying on moral advice:

> *Moral Advice as Evidence:* One relies on moral advice when one treats another's testimony as a piece of evidence to be weighed against other non-testimonial evidence that one has.[16]
>
> *Moral Advice as Practical Moral Deference:* One relies on moral advice when one engages in moral deference concerning practical questions that one is facing or will face, e.g., "Should *I* attend my co-worker's wedding?" or "Is it wrong for *me* to refrain from donating to charity?" This is distinct, for example, from deferring about the moral status of *someone else's* action.
>
> *Moral Advice as Moral Weight Deference:* One relies on moral advice when one engages in moral deference concerning the all-things-considered moral status of an action, event, state of affairs, etc. That is, moral deference about how moral reasons weigh up.[17]

On the first interpretation, there is a clear distinction between the cases above and moral deference. On the second two interpretations, once the details are made clear, the above cases become just as troubling as the standard cases of moral deference or the pessimist can explain why these cases are not off-putting.

Before considering how the pessimist should respond, let us get clearer about what kind of reliance is involved in moral deference. First, the pessimist is concerned with cases in which the reliance is *full* and *complete*, i.e., the protagonist forms and bases a *full/outright* moral belief *completely/solely* on the basis of the advisor's assertion.[18] Second, the pessimist is more concerned with deferential *beliefs* than with deferential *acceptances*. This is because the former deference will most often be indefinite or hard to relinquish, whereas the latter will not. After all,

[16] One can treat another's moral advice as another piece of evidence in at least two ways. First, one can treat it alongside one's first-order evidence. This is how I imagine many pessimists think about how people use moral advice. Second, one can treat moral advice as second-order (i.e., evidence about one's evidence or the evidence generally available) and then weigh that second-order evidence alongside one's own judgment of what the evidence says. Importantly, in neither case does one base one's moral belief *solely* on what another person says or believes.

[17] This is how McShane (2018) interprets Wedding (262). Moral Advice as Practical Moral Deference and Moral Advice as Moral Weight Deference will often overlap. The difference is that the former is deference about how to act (and/or what proposition to *accept* as opposed to believe) and the latter can answer both "How to act?" and "What to believe?"

[18] For example, McGrath (2011) writes, "[T]here seems to be something odd or peculiar about my genuinely believing that capital punishment is wrong simply on the basis of your testimony, in a way that there is nothing similarly odd or peculiar about my believing that we should turn left simply on the basis of your testimony… (113)."

what we believe is not under our direct control, but what we accept is. Thus, pessimists are best understood as being concerned with *full*, *outright, indefinite, doxastic deference*.

If relying on moral advice just means treating another's testimony as a piece of evidence to be weighed against one's non-testimonial evidence, then the above cases are not problematic for the pessimist. This is because treating moral advice as more evidence doesn't involve basing one's belief *solely* on the testifier's say-so. Here, one uses one's own evaluative and rational capacities to come to one's own conclusion about the moral status of the action, event, or state of affairs in question. Thus, moral advice, on this interpretation, only involves *partial* deference.

What is important for pessimists about the full vs. partial distinction is *not* a matter of the amount that one uses one's own reasoning or critical thinking abilities.[19] Rather, they are concerned with what one *bases* one's moral beliefs on. It just so happens that basing one's moral beliefs on the right kinds of things most often involves using one's own reasoning or critical thinking abilities more than is generally involved in deferring. For example, when one uses belief-formation methods other than deference, one's belief will often be based on the morally relevant properties of the actions, events, or states of affairs.

Basing one's moral beliefs on these properties is important for pessimists—albeit for different reasons. Many pessimists think one must base one's beliefs on morally relevant properties in order to gain some target epistemic state (e.g., understanding or acquaintance), which is necessary for meeting certain moral ideals (performing actions with moral worth, being virtuous, fittingly having the full range of affective and conative reactions, etc.). Others think one must base one's beliefs on these target epistemic states to be able to meet these ideals. For example, Hills (2009) writes, "I have argued that it is essential to virtue and to an important kind of morally worthy action that you base your moral beliefs on your moral understanding."[20] Thus, for pessimists, there is an important difference between treating a piece of testimony or advice as another reason among many and treating a piece of testimony or advice as the *sole* reason one believes something, where there are other reasons available to one.[21]

Thus, this interpretation of moral advice fails to support either the weak or the strong version of the Moral Advice Objection. This is because, given this interpretation of what moral advice is, the above cases do not involve moral deference at all.

If relying on moral advice means engaging in moral deference concerning practical questions that one faces or will face, then the above cases are not

[19] While it is true that Hills (2009) thinks that deference interferes with one exercising and developing one's ability to make accurate moral judgments, this is not her main worry about moral deference. Moreover, it is a concern with continual or perpetual moral deference (120). Herein, however, I've mainly been concerned with what is bad about individual instances of moral deference.

[20] Hills (2009), 119.

[21] Of course, one could challenge whether deference is incompatible with some specific target epistemic state or whether these states are necessary for certain moral achievements, but that would be to challenge specific accounts of pessimism and not the very idea of pessimism.

problematic for the pessimist. This is because there will often be countervailing reasons that defeat one's reason to not defer. After all, pessimism is most charitably interpreted as arguing that one has a *pro tanto* (moral or epistemic) reason to not defer. One set of defeaters concerns the practical stakes or limitations that one faces. For example, it might be that one has a limited time to figure out what to do. But such a time crunch is often a defeater for the pessimistic prohibition against deference. The same applies to high-stakes situations. In these kinds of cases, pessimists are happy to admit that deference is *all-things-considered* permissible and thus should not be intuitively troubling. Thus, one reason the above cases might not be troubling is that the protagonists' reason to not defer is simply outweighed or defeated.

Another kind of defeater concerns one's epistemic circumstances. Often when we seek out moral advice, it's because we are in a less than ideal epistemic position (e.g., we have certain biases or cognitive impairments or are just uncertain of what to do). In such cases, it's rationally impossible for us to make up our own minds. In such cases, the pessimist can point out that one can overcome this less-than-ideal position without engaging in full, outright, indefinite, doxastic deference. Rather, one can treat the testifier's testimony as evidence à la Moral Advice as Evidence. Completely deferring to another's say-so and ignoring *all* the non-testimonial evidence one has seems irresponsible and unmotivated. Or, one can simply accept that *p* instead of believing it. If the deferrer can choose between the two and chooses believing that *p* solely on the basis of testimony instead of accepting that *p* solely on the basis of testimony, then she has in fact done something off-putting.

On the other hand, if one's epistemic position is so bad that one should be ignoring all of one's non-testimonial evidence, then it's clear that one *should* defer. But the pessimist can handle these cases as well because the pessimist's prohibition on moral deference is *pro tanto* and if one cannot rationally assess any of one's non-testimonial evidence, then it is all-things-considered permissible (or perhaps required) for one to defer.[22]

Thus, this interpretation of moral advice fails to support either the weak or the strong version of the Moral Advice Objection. This is because pessimists think that moral deference is always *pro tanto* (morally or epistemically) wrong. However, on this interpretation of moral advice, the above cases only show that not all cases of moral deference are *all-things-considered* wrong. In order to provide a true counterexample to NO DEFERENCE, critics would need to find a case of moral deference that doesn't have any defeaters and is also not off-putting. To my knowledge, no one has presented such a case.

Finally, if relying on moral advice means engaging in moral deference concerning the all-things-considered moral status of an action, event, state of affairs, etc., then the above cases are not problematic for the pessimist. This is because once it is made clear that the above cases involve full, outright, indefinite, doxastic deference, they become just as troubling as the standard cases that pessimists use to motivate their view. (This response also works against Moral

[22] Mogensen (2017) makes a similar point (264).

Advice as Practical Moral Deference when there aren't additional reasons that countervail the pessimist's prohibition against deference). Consider the following amended case:

> **Trip*:** Anna is a journalist who is preparing to go on a reporting trip to a dangerous and conflict-ridden area. She has to tell her family that she will be away but she really doesn't know what to tell them. If she tells them where exactly she's going and why, they will be extremely worried. On the other hand, she worries that by evading the questions she would be lying. She goes back and forth but cannot decide what the right thing to do is and eventually decides to ask a friend whose judgment she trusts. Her friend tells her that she morally ought to tell her family about her plans and solely on the basis of her friend's advice, Anna forms the outright belief that she morally ought to inform her family about her plans. Anna will maintain this belief unless she gets a reason to drop it.

Anna's deference in this version of the case is just as troubling as Eleanor's deference in Vegetarian.

Thus, this interpretation of moral advice fails to support either the weak or the strong version of the Moral Advice Objection. It fails to support the weak version of the objection, because all the purported counterexamples end up being just as off-putting as the cases that pessimists use to motivate their view. It fails to support the strong version of the objection because defending this version would require: (1) one non-problematic case which has no defeaters for the pessimistic prohibition against moral deference and (2) an argument that there is no relevant difference between the non-problematic case and the problematic cases that pessimists appeal to. Neither of which is offered.

Thus, proponents of the Moral Advice Objection are stuck having to admit that: (a) there is an important difference between relying on moral deference and relying on moral advice, (b) the original cases above do not tell against pessimism, or (c) relying on moral advice is just as troubling as relying on moral deference.

3 Against MORAL EXPLANATION: debunking explanations

Challenging MORAL EXPLANATION is a way of challenging NO DEFERENCE. After all, pessimists can claim that our intuitive aversion to moral deference is evidence that there is something wrong with it. However, if MORAL EXPLANATION is false and our aversion to cases of moral deference can be explained by something other than the fact that it involves a moral claim, then pessimists have one less means of defense. In such cases, our aversion to this deference would be evidence that there is something wrong with some other kind of deference, e.g., deference about controversial claims, and not with moral deference *itself*.

Several authors argue against MORAL EXPLANATION by offering debunking explanations, i.e., explanations for why we are averse to moral deference that do

not rely on the fact that moral deference involves moral matters.[23] These authors pick some feature that is common to off-putting cases of both moral and non-moral deference and argue that the best explanation of our aversion to moral deference is the presence of this feature.

These debunking explanations locate the source of the off-puttingness in the deferrer (The Ignorance Explanation), the kind of proposition one is deferring about (The Controversy Explanation), the source of the testimony (The Peer Explanation and The No Experts Explanation), or the circumstances surrounding the choosing of the testimonial source (The Luck Explanation and The Independent Check Explanation).

3.1 The ignorance explanation

According to the Ignorance Explanation, what is troubling about certain cases of moral deference is that having to defer indicates a troubling moral or non-moral ignorance in the deferrer. In the case of moral deference, proponents of this explanation argue that what is troubling is that deference reveals the agent's ignorance of basic moral truths or her inability to figure out the answer to easy moral questions.[24] For example, it would be troubling to defer about the following questions: "Is killing wrong?" and "Ought I to save a drowning child even if doing so requires me to ruin my expensive suit?". But, these authors argue, it's also troubling to defer about certain non-moral issues, e.g., whether "some Xs are F" entails "all Xs are F," whether gender makes a difference to intelligence, or whether perception is a reliable source of knowledge of one's surroundings.[25]

I agree with these authors that there is something not just strange but "bizarre" about someone's merely asking for moral advice in the above cases.[26] But I think that cases like these are not relevant to the debate at hand. Notice that just *asking* if one is required to ruin one's expensive suit in order to save a child from drowning is intuitively problematic.[27] They might be right that it is the agent's profound

[23] Debunking explanations are especially important for proponents of the strong version of the Moral Advice Objection, because they endorse the claim that there is no relevant difference between moral deference and moral advice. Pessimists can respond by accepting the "no relevant difference" premise and then argue that our intuitive aversion to moral deference is evidence that there is something wrong with moral deference. They can then conclude that since there's no relevant difference between moral deference and moral advice, it must also be wrong to rely on moral advice.

In order to block this parallel argument, proponents of the Moral Advice Objection need to argue that our intuition that there is something wrong with moral deference is less reliable or trustworthy than our intuition that there is nothing wrong with moral advice. Thus, showing that MORAL EXPLANATION is false would allow them to defend their own view.

[24] Sliwa (2012) and Groll and Decker (2014).

[25] Sliwa (2012), 186.

[26] Sliwa (2012), 185.

[27] Groll and Decker also note that it is always off-putting to deference about something that is "constitutive knowledge" of some role that one occupies. Constitutive knowledge for a particular role is the knowledge that a person must have to competently perform the role. For example, it is off-putting for a surgeon to defer about how to perform a surgery. These cases are not analogous to the kinds of moral cases pessimists are interested in. Notice that it would off-putting for a professional surgeon to *ask* her

ignorance that explains why this case is troubling. However, these are not the kind of cases that people who are skeptical about moral testimony are concerned with—nor do they ever mention such cases. This is because they are concerned with *mature* moral agents, i.e., moral agents with basic reasoning capacities and moral sensitivities.[28] Pessimists fully admit that it is fine to defer about moral claims when one is deeply morally ignorant and so cannot come to accurate conclusions on one's own.[29] This is why pessimists are happy to admit that there's nothing wrong with children deferring on moral matters.[30]

If moral deference isn't troubling because it reveals an ignorance in the deferrer, perhaps it's troubling because of the kind of the proposition one is deferring about.

3.2 The controversy explanation

According to the Controversy Explanation, moral deference is troubling because it involves deferring about controversial claims, about which equally well-informed people disagree.[31] Deferring about controversial claims is usually troubling and moral claims are often controversial, so moral deference is troubling because it's a subset of a broader off-putting phenomenon.

I think this debunking explanation ignores the fact that controversy is relative to a class of people. For example, the question of whether evolution happened is controversial amongst evangelical Christians, but it is not at all controversial amongst biologists. Whether deferring is troubling depends upon whose testimony you trust. Notice that it is not at all troubling to defer to a biologist about whether evolution happened. Concerning moral claims, therefore, we should be concerned about whether the moral claims being deferred about are controversial relative to well-informed moral agents, e.g., some kind of moral expert or group of friends that are more expert than oneself. Are there such claims whose truth values are also not obvious? I think so.

To begin, notice that there are non-moral claims whose truth values are neither obvious nor controversial for most people. For example, De Morgan's Laws:

$(\sim p) \,\&\, (\sim q)$ if and only if $\sim (p \text{ or } q)$
$(\sim p)$ or $(\sim q)$ if and only if $\sim (p \,\&\, q)$

Without thinking about it, these statements of logical equivalence are not *obviously* true (at least not immediately), but they are also not controversial.

Footnote 27 continued
colleague how to perform a common surgery. But many moral questions are hard and it is not expected of people to know the answer.

[28] Hills (2009), 120. This doesn't mean that they know everything there is to know about morality, but it does mean that they have only (or perhaps mostly) true beliefs about basic moral truths.

[29] For example, see: Hopkins (2007), 613 and 626 (fn. 10); Hills (2009), 120 and 125–26.

[30] For example, Hills (2009), 120.

[31] Sliwa (2012), 187. Davia and Palmira (2015) consider, but reject, this explanation (608–609).

In the moral domain, there are some mid-level moral principles whose truth value is neither obvious nor particularly controversial. For example[32]:

i. Generally, you ought to keep your promises.[33]
ii. Generally, you ought to show gratitude toward your benefactors.
iii. Generally, you ought to do good to others.

Notice that merely *asking* a trusted advisor if these claims are true is not troubling or bizarre.[34]

In addition to these mid-level principles, there are numerous moral issues whose truth values are neither obvious nor controversial amongst moral philosophers or other morally mature agents. For example, I strongly suspect that the vast majority of moral philosophers think that the following actions are—under normal circumstances—morally permissible:

i. Using birth control.
ii. Consensual premarital sex.
iii. Masturbation.
iv. Divorce because one falls out of love.
v. Having a child outside of marriage because neither partner wants to get married.
vi. Same-sex relationships.
vii. Gambling.
viii. Human embryonic stem cell research.
ix. Physician-assisted suicide when the patient is in constant suffering from a terminal disease.

So, deferring to moral philosophers about the permissibility of these issues would not constitute deferring about a controversial claim.[35] However, notice that fully deferring about these claims would be troubling.

Finally, it is not usually off-putting to use non-deferential belief-formation methods to form beliefs about controversial moral claims. Imagine that Peter is curious about the morality of eating meat and so he reads a philosophy book that argues that eating meat is wrong. He is entitled to believe that the author is an expert on this topic. Imagine further that on the basis of a compelling and sound argument,

[32] I'm considering these principles pre-theoretically, i.e., I mean that their truth values are neither obvious nor controversial if one remains neutral about which fundamental moral principle is true or if any fundamental moral principles are true. Moreover, I'm thinking of them as claims about what we have *pro tanto*—as opposed to all-things-considered—moral reason to do.

[33] I owe this example to Robert Cowan.

[34] Of course, it may be true that these principles are *somewhat* obvious to those who have considered them in depth. But this isn't the kind of obviousness that Sliwa is referring to. One does not need to think about whether one is required to save the drowning child for more than a nanosecond to be sure that one is indeed required to do this.

[35] Another problem with this debunking explanation is that it is not clear that deferring about controversial non-moral claims is *just as* fishy or fishy in the same way as deferring about controversial moral claims. For example, my deferring to a physicist that string theory is true seems odd, but it's not troubling in the way that deferring about moral claims is.

which he understands, Peter comes to believe that eating meat is wrong. It seems to me that Peter's belief would be justified—although defeasibly so—even though such a claim is controversial. Moreover, there is nothing troubling about his forming this belief. But, if it not troubling to form a belief about a controversial moral issue on the basis of a compelling and sound argument, but it is troubling to form that same belief on the basis of full deference, then it is not the fact that the claim is controversial that explains our aversion to moral deference, it's the fact that one formed the belief via deference.

Even if there are many moral claims that are not controversial amongst moral philosophers and thoughtful moral agents, there is still much disagreement. Perhaps the problem is not that moral claims are too controversial to defer about, but rather that finding an advisor with true moral views involves getting lucky in a knowledge-undermining way.

3.3 The luck explanation

According to The Luck Explanation, moral deference is troubling because choosing an advisor who actually knows the moral status of the action in question will be lucky in a way that undermines knowledge.[36] That is, choosing the right moral advisor involves a kind of environmental luck that undermines moral knowledge in the same way that looking at the only real barn in barn-façade county undermines perceptual knowledge that there was a barn.[37]

First, notice that if this argument works against moral deference it will likely work against any of the interpretations of what moral advice is. This is because it is likely that our trusted advisors disagree on at least some moral matters. Second, I think this way of making the objection only works when either (or both) of two assumptions are made: (a) the advisee is not aware that there is disagreement amongst peers about the issue at hand, and (b) the advisee takes the testimony of a person without knowing anything about the advisor's other values or their track record. So, perhaps a subset of troubling moral deference cases can be explained by appeal to knowledge-undermining luck, but there are cases that cannot be explained by this. For example:

> **Track Record:** Andy wants to know if euthanasia if morally permissible. He knows that epistemic peers disagree about it. However, Andy is aware of the track record of Susan, a moral philosopher. On many past occasions, she has told him that numerous actions are impermissible and that numerous others are permissible. On these occasions, he did not just take her word for it, but rather he investigated the issues for himself. In each of these cases, he eventually came to agree with Susan. On this occasion, he forms his belief that euthanasia

[36] I owe this objection to Mark van Roojen.

[37] Note this objection relies on the claim that so-called environmental luck undermines knowledge. While this is the current orthodoxy, it is not without its detractors. For example, see: Hetherington (1998) and Turri (2012). Moreover, recent empirical research suggests that the folk do not think that environmental luck undermines knowledge (e.g., see: Colaço et al. (2014) and Turri (2017)).

is generally morally permissible solely on the basis of Susan's saying that it is generally morally permissible.

Intuitively, Andy gets moral knowledge from Susan's testimony. However, Andy's deference to Susan is troubling despite the fact that he knew the question was controversial and he did not just randomly choose Susan.[38] Thus, it seems that what explains our aversion to moral deference is not that forming beliefs in this way involves knowledge-undermining luck. Rather, it looks like it is the fact that one is deferring about a moral claim that makes the difference.

Perhaps our aversion to moral deference is not explained by the fact that it is hard (and lucky) to find advisors with true moral beliefs, rather maybe it's hard to identify the kinds of people we should rely on, e.g., moral experts.

3.4 The independent check explanation

According to the Independent Check Explanation, moral deference is troubling because there is no independent check for whether moral advisors are reliable or what they say is true.[39] With a tailor, we can check to see if the suit fits; with a doctor, we can check if the disease has gone away; with a pitcher, we can check the speed of his throw. But, we have no way of independently checking to see if the action has the moral property that a moral advisor claims it does. So, it is troubling to defer to moral advisors, but not non-moral advisors, because, in practice, it is hard to identify them and we know this. Thus, it is likely hard to be justified in believing (or knowing) that a person is a reliable moral advisor. This means that it is hard to gain knowledge or justified belief from their testimony.

The first problem with this explanation is the claim that warrant to rely on the testimony of an advisor or expert requires the ability to *independently verify* their track record or what they claim. This seems to over-intellectualize the epistemology of testimony and to require too much for knowledge acquisition. If one has independent verification that the advisor is unreliable or that a particular assertion of

[38] In cases like Track Record, the deferrer seems to meet two epistemic conditions that Zagzebski (2012) thinks are individually sufficient for being epistemically justified in relying on another for one's moral beliefs. First, he is justified in believing that he will be more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief if he defers to another's say-so than if he comes to the belief on his own. Second, he is justified in believing that his deferential belief is more likely to survive his future critical reflection on the matter than it would be if he had come to the belief on his own. I think meeting both of Zagzebski's conditions makes it clearer that Andy gains knowledge in Track Record. Nonetheless, his deference is still off-putting (161).

[39] Example, see: McGrath (2009). McGrath proposes the following explanation:

> **Socratic Proposal:** Moral deference is in principle no more problematic than deference in other domains. But in practice, there are formidable epistemological difficulties that arise when one attempts to recognize or identify someone with superior moral judgment; moreover, we (perhaps implicitly) recognize that this is the case (334).

hers is false, then this certainly counts as against her testimony. But that is another matter.[40]

Second, there are non-moral advisors whose track record or particular assertion the average person is not in a position to independently verify. For example, as Howell (2014) notes, no average person is in the position to independently verify the track record or individual assertions of experts at the highest levels of math and science.[41] Nonetheless, there is nothing intuitively problematic about deferring to them.

Whatever kind of evidence the average person has to believe that a particular person is an expert in their field will likely be available for at least moral experts. For example, both physicists and moral philosophers are employed by universities, both publish in peer-reviewed journals, both receive research grants, both teach students, both receive Ph.Ds from accredited academic institutions, and so on.[42]

Moreover, notice that people are not generally skeptical about being able to identify advisors or experts in other normative domains, e.g., aesthetics and etiquette. There are critics for film, television, theater, music, and so on. People read books and columns written by these critics and rely on their judgments. Etiquette is another normative domain wherein there are recognized experts whose judgments we trust. People pay lots of money to take etiquette classes. So, it is generally not difficult to identify experts in other normative domains. This gives us reason to think that perhaps it is not so difficult to identify moral advisors or experts either.

Finally, there are plenty of people that we treat as moral advisors even though they are not moral experts in the sense in which doctors are medical experts. We seem perfectly able to identify reliable friends, family members, and clergy who are more experienced than us. Moreover, for centuries, people have consulted advice columnists (or agony aunts) for advice.[43] So, if it is, in fact, rather difficult in practice to identify moral experts, then this widespread practice of seeking out the moral advice of friends, family, clergy, and columnists is largely epistemically irresponsible. But, that seems rather unlikely.

[40] I owe this point to Errol Lord. This point does not commit me to either non-reductionism or reductionism about the epistemology of testimony. According to non-reductionism: A is justified in accepting B's testimony so long as there are no undefeated good reasons to not accept B's testimony. What I said is compatible with A being justified in accepting B's testimony that *p* only if A has reason to accept B's testimony that *p* that is independent of the fact that B asserted that *p*. Perhaps A is only justified if some other person, C, vouches for B's testimony. The key point is that A shouldn't be required to be able to properly assess an expert's sophisticated track-record before being justified in accepting her testimony.

[41] Howell (2014), 394.

[42] If moral philosophers are not the right kind of moral expert to defer to, there are also moral exemplars, e.g., the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and so on. We get evidence that they are moral experts because they are praised by people whose judgment we trust, they are invited to speak at universities, they publish books, appear on television, and so on.

[43] *The New York Times Magazine* even has a column called "The Ethicist" in which a professional philosopher (Kwame Anthony Appiah) responds to readers' moral quandaries.

So perhaps we can identify reliable moral advisors, but perhaps the problem is that they are just our epistemic peers and thus we should not defer to them just like we don't defer to epistemic peers on non-moral matters.

3.5 The peer explanation[44]

According to The Peer Explanation, our aversion to moral deference is best explained by the fact that the cases that motivate the debate, once properly qualified, are cases of deferring to an epistemic peer.[45] Deferring to an epistemic peer is problematic and thus we have an explanation of our aversion to moral deference without any appeal to the fact that the content of the deference is moral.

The most plausible way of spelling out this explanation is to focus on McGrath (2011)'s criteria for what counts as troubling moral deference, because it is the most demanding.[46] First, the deference must include purely moral content and thus it should not include purely non-moral content that happens to bear on the moral status of an action. For example, imagine that Bill is committed to not uttering racial slurs, but he forgets all the words that constitute racial slurs. It would not count as moral deference—in the relevant sense—if he defers to Claudia about *which words* are slurs. This is an empirical question. Second, the deferrer is not cognitively impaired (e.g., by bias, intoxication, or tiredness) at the time of the deference. From this, one might infer that the relevant cases of moral deference cannot involve a difference in "cognitive equipment" between the deferrer and the testifier.[47] And, on the basis of these two qualifications, one might conclude the deferrer and the testifier must be epistemic peers.

There are problems with this explanation, however. First, not all pessimists accept McGrath's criteria for the kind of deference we're interested in. Second, the inference from "the deferrer cannot have a cognitive impairment" to "the deferrer and the testifier cannot have differently functioning 'cognitive equipment'" is a bad one. No pessimist thinks that the paradigmatic cases of moral deference involve *no* difference in the cognitive or rational capacities of the testifier and the deferrer. What is important for pessimists is not the difference itself, but the *source* of this difference. What the pessimist wants to rule out are cases in which a deferrer does not have fully functional rational capacities. In particular, she wants to rule out cases in which it is physically or rationally impossible (or exceedingly difficult or requiring too high a cost) for the deferrer to come to understand why p on her own. This is why pessimists are not concerned with children deferring. However, it is

[44] The possibility of this explanation is gestured at in Coady (1992), 72.

[45] This explanation is offered by Davia and Palmira (2015). They rely on Kelly (2005)'s account of epistemic peers, according to which two or more people are epistemic peers regarding some question iff: "(i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and (ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias (175)."

[46] It should be noted that only McGrath explicitly requires that the deferrer not be biased in some way. So this objection only gains traction against a pessimist who accepts McGrath's criteria.

[47] Davia and Palmira (2015) seem to make this inference.

possible for the deferrer to have fully functional cognitive or rational capacities and for the testifier to nonetheless have superior rational or cognitive abilities, e.g., because she is a trained moral philosopher, or a more experienced moral reasoner, or a more virtuous person, and so on.

Finally, even if each individual deferrer and each individual testifier are epistemic peers, there are still off-putting cases of moral deference. Take a case of 10 epistemic peers. One of them believes *p* and the other nine believe not-*p*. The nine jointly tell the one that not-*p*. The nine together are not an epistemic peer of the one. The group is more likely to get the answer right than the individual—when they are all epistemic peers and their beliefs are formed independently of each other's beliefs. Now imagine that one were to defer to the nine that not-*p*. This would still be off-putting despite the fact that everyone involved is an epistemic peer.

If moral deference doesn't involve deferring to epistemic peers, then it must involve deferring to epistemic superiors, e.g., moral experts. But are there actual moral experts? Perhaps the reason many think it is so hard to identify moral experts is that they don't actually exist.

3.6 The no experts explanation[48]

According to the No Experts Explanation, moral deference is troubling because there are no moral experts and so treating someone as a moral expert by deferring to them is to do something problematic. But this is not a distinctive problem for morality.[49] After all, it's troubling to treat people as experts in any domain in which there are no (or cannot be) experts (e.g., the domain of witches or unicorns). Adequately addressing the nuances of the literature on moral expertise is beyond the scope of this paper.[50] Fortunately, I do not need to address these nuances, because I think that focusing on experts in the moral deference literature is a red herring. First, all you need for it to be epistemically permissible (rational, justified, warranted, etc.) for one person to defer to another is for the second person to be an expert *relative* to the deferrer. That is, all you need is that the person to whom one defers is epistemically better placed regarding the proposition than one is. In non-moral domains, there is generally no intuitive problem with deferring to someone epistemically better placed than one. But, it is still intuitively problematic to defer to even relative moral experts (e.g., Trip*). So, outright moral expertise is not even required to motivate either NO DEFERENCE or MORAL EXPLANATION.[51]

[48] Coady (1992) notes that our skepticism about moral testimony might be based on the belief that there are no moral experts in the sense that all mature moral agents are epistemic peers and there just are not moral experts for us—although there might be for children (72).

[49] For a discussion of the connection between our aversion to moral testimony and the plausibility of there being moral experts, see: Coady (1992), 72–75.

[50] For more on the question of whether there are moral experts (as well as whether moral philosophers are moral experts), see: Ryle (1958), Singer (1972), Szabados (1978), Anscombe (1983), McConnell (1984), Williams (1995), Narvaez and Lapsley (2005), and Driver (2006 and 2013).

[51] Enoch (2014) notes this, but not in response to a criticism of pessimism (233, fn. 9).

Second, MORAL EXPLANATION can be motivated even if pessimists accept that there are no moral experts of any kind. In particular, one can argue that it is generally epistemically permissible to defer to the consensus of a *group* of epistemic peers. But, it is normally off-putting to defer to such a consensus concerning moral matters. This response relies only on the existence of epistemic peers on moral matters. Thus, the pessimist need not rely on the existence of moral experts to argue for MORAL EXPLANATION.

4 Conclusion

Pessimists, as I have defined them, endorse both NO DEFERENCE and MORAL EXPLANATION. Both claims have recently come under attack. Some critics argue that there are counterexamples to NO DEFERENCE (The Moral Advice Objection). I argued that these critics face a trilemma according to which moral advice is either clearly distinct from moral deference or just as troubling as moral deference. Some critics challenge MORAL EXPLANATION by arguing that our aversion to moral deference can be explained by any number of debunking explanations. These alternative explanations make no reference to the fact that the content of the deference is moral nor do they provide support for NO DEFERENCE. I argued that none of these explanations (nor their conjunction) could explain all troubling cases of deference and/or they faced objections of their own. Given the failure of these objections, I'm optimistic about the defensibility of moral deference pessimism.

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