

Solidarity and the Work of Moral Understanding

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Abstract: Because moral understanding involves a distinctly first-personal grasp of moral matters, there is a temptation to think of its value primarily in terms of achievements that reflect well on its possessor: the moral worth of one's action, or the virtue of one's character. These explanations, I argue, fail to do full justice to the importance of moral understanding in our moral lives. Of equal importance is the value of moral understanding in our *relations* with other moral agents. In particular, I argue that an understanding of moral matters is of central importance within relations of *solidarity*. In addition to highlighting an overlooked aspect of moral understanding's value, this view also has important implications for what solidarity requires of those who stand in that relationship.

Keywords: moral understanding; moral testimony; solidarity; deference

Most philosophers agree that we can come to know moral facts—facts about what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, justified or unjustified, and so on—on the basis of testimony. But there is wide disagreement about whether and to what extent we ought to rely on the moral testimony we receive from others.

Some philosophers believe that relying on moral testimony is deficient because it doesn't yield moral understanding. If you believe that crossing a picket line is wrong merely because your friend told you so, you might well know, on that basis, that it is wrong to cross a picket line, but you won't understand why it is wrong. Moreover, these philosophers insist, the understanding

which testimony fails to provide is distinctively valuable within the moral domain. We should aim at moral understanding because it is necessary for morally worthy action (Hills 2009; Howard 2018), because it is a constitutive part of virtue (Hills 2015; Callahan 2018), and more generally because it is a requirement or ideal of good moral agency to believe moral claims for the reasons why they are true (Nickel 2001, Hopkins 2007). If you were to refrain from crossing a picket line merely because you were told that it would be wrong, you may well be doing the right thing, but your action would lack moral worth. You yourself would not deserve credit for acting rightly.

Other philosophers are not swayed by this line of reasoning. According to them, there is nothing inherently deficient about relying on moral testimony. As these philosophers point out, even if moral testimony doesn't transfer moral understanding, and even if moral understanding is valuable, dependence on moral testimony may be valuable in its own right, and more than valuable enough to make up for the foregone opportunity to perfect our own moral agency. In particular, proponents of moral testimony point out that dependence on moral testimony is an important good within valuable interpersonal *relationships*, such as friendship (Lillehammer 2014; McShane 2018) and solidarity (Wiland 2017, 2021). By taking another person's word for it that crossing the picket line would be wrong, you may well be doing what friendship or solidarity requires.¹

Notice the sharp contrast between the reasons why moral understanding, on the one hand, and reliance on moral testimony, on the other, are thought to be valuable. The framing assumption seems to be that whereas accepting moral testimony is valuable in the context of relationships, moral understanding is valuable only for its contribution to moral goods that are *individual*, in the sense that these goods are realized within a single moral agent. I ought to understand why some

¹ For instance, McShane (2018) argues that relying on the moral testimony of our friends is a way of expressing our trust in them, and Wiland (2017) highlights that deferring to someone's moral testimony, in solidarity, can be a way of countering a credibility deficit that they face.

moral claim is true, rather than taking your word for it, because doing so is necessary for *me* to act with moral worth, be virtuous, and conform to the regulatory ideal of believing moral claims for the reasons why they are true.² What, if anything, counts against relying on moral testimony is that, by failing to yield moral understanding, it fails to contribute to these individual moral goods.³

This way of conceiving of the value of moral understanding can seem very natural. After all, as many authors have pointed out, what distinguishes understanding from mere knowledge is the kind of first-personal grasp of reasons which it essentially involves.⁴ What we know we may borrow from others, but what we understand we must understand for ourselves. The moral agent who understands why crossing the picket line is wrong appreciates the reasons why it is wrong: she herself grasps what is wrong with crossing the picket line. The first-personal nature of moral understanding, in turn, can suggest a view of why such understanding matters. Since having moral understanding requires me to grasp moral reasons *myself*, it is natural to think that the value of this achievement must be connected to moral goods which in some way reflect well on *me*, such as the moral worth of my actions or the virtue of my character. Thus, I take it that it is not a coincidence if accounts of the value of moral understanding have focused on its relation to individual moral achievements. The very nature of moral understanding can lead us into assuming that this is where its importance lies.

And yet, for all its prevalence and immediate plausibility, this framing assumption about the value of moral understanding is, I believe, mistaken. Moral understanding is not only valuable

² Another consideration that tends to enter the mix is that moral understanding is valuable because you need it in order to be able to justify yourself to others (Hopkins 2007, Hills 2009). This might seem to point towards something of interpersonal value, but even here, what is of value is having the *ability* to defend one's choices and actions against moral criticism. This moral good is individual too: the ability to defend one's choices is something that is realized or achieved by a single moral agent. I elaborate on this point in section 5.

³ Even those detractors of moral testimony who *don't* appeal to moral understanding still appeal to individual moral goods, e.g., autonomy (Wolff 1970), authenticity (Mogensen 2017), or good moral character (Howell 2014).

⁴ See Hills 2009, 2015, 2016; Bengson 2015.

for its contribution to goods which are realized within individual moral agents. Just as importantly, moral understanding is valuable because it is *interpersonally valuable*, that is, valuable in our relations with other moral agents.

Though I think that an understanding of moral matters plays a central role in a wide range of relationships, in this paper I will focus my attention on just one type of relationship: relationships of *solidarity*. My thesis, then, is the following: moral understanding (in some cases, moral understanding that is shared with others) is valuable within relations of solidarity.

I defend this thesis not only because it strikes me to be true, but also because it may strike others as misguided. Indeed, although the main thrust of this paper is positive, there is also a natural foil to the view I wish to defend. The foil, roughly, is this: as an agent aiming to be in solidarity with others, the best way to manage your moral beliefs (at least: the moral beliefs relevant to that specific relationship) is to defer to the moral testimony of those you stand in solidarity with.⁵ One upshot of the view I will defend in this paper is that this general picture of the relationship between solidarity and moral inquiry is incorrect.

Here is how I'll proceed. Section 1 provides a brief characterization of solidarity, and introduces a distinction between internal and external relations of solidarity. Section 2 provides two arguments for the value of moral understanding within internal solidarity: the *Reflection Argument* and the *Power Argument*. Section 3 introduces and clarifies the view that serves as a foil in this paper: the deferential view of external solidarity. Sections 4 and 5 provide, *contra* that deferential view, two arguments for the value of moral understanding within relations of external solidarity: the *Conflict Argument* and the *Unfair Burden Argument*. Section 6 concludes.

⁵ Kolers (2016); McKinnon (2017). See also Wiland (2021), who defends the view that reliance on moral testimony is superior to moral understanding within relations of 'epistemic solidarity.'

1. Two Kinds of Solidarity

Moral agents can stand in relationships of solidarity with one another. Individuals can be in solidarity with groups (Maya can be in solidarity with student workers), groups can be in solidarity with other groups (student workers can be in solidarity with workers at Starbucks), and it's also possible to be in solidarity with an individual, considered either as a member of a group (Maya can be in solidarity with the adjunct lecturer who teaches her class), or as the victim of a particular case of injustice. So, there is a fair amount of variety as to who can be in solidarity with whom. But what does seem obvious is that solidarity is essentially relational.⁶

Although solidarity is fundamentally a relationship, it can also be a moral motive for action. You can perform an action *out of* solidarity with others. These two aspects of the concept—the relationship, and the motive—are intimately related. You don't stand in a relationship of solidarity with a group or individual if you're not at least disposed to take on certain burdens out of solidarity with them. Whether you really are in solidarity with them depends on what you do when the chips are down. More generally, there is nothing bizarre about the same thing being both a relationship and a motive. In addition to being someone's friend, you can also act out of friendship towards them.

Solidarity is also *oppositional*, at least in a wide range of cases. In some cases, the way to stand in solidarity with others against an injustice will be to single out particular moral agents (e.g. an employer), while in other cases our target may simply be a pervasive kind of wrong (e.g. sexism). But in both instances, we stand in solidarity with others *against* an injustice or

⁶ Cf. Harvey (2007: 22).

infringement of a right. This is a point on which solidarity and friendship differ: being friends with someone doesn't usually involve being friends *against* someone else.

One reason why the oppositional aspect of solidarity is important to keep in view is that it bears directly on the value of that relationship. Since solidarity is a response to a perceived injustice, a token instance of solidarity might be based on a misperception. A group of individuals might stand in solidarity against something that is no injustice at all. Whether or not solidarity is apt or correct seems to make a big difference to whether it is valuable. We thus miss something important if we try to locate the value of solidarity in the benefits it provides to those who stand in it, as some philosophers suggest: "The thought of solidarity, of belonging to a larger group of people bound together with a shared vision and a common goal, the whole *e pluribus unum* thing—this tends to give us warm, safe, fuzzy, comfortable feelings of meaningfulness, connectedness, and happiness" (Wiland 2021: 110). This may well be true, but whether a token solidarity relationship is morally valuable depends on whether its target is in fact an injustice. There is no moral value in a group of CEOs coming together to oppose what they perceive to be an unjust tax on capital gain. Indeed, it is much more plausible to think that their standing in that relationship, as well as the warm, safe, and fuzzy feelings they derive from it, are morally disvaluable.

It is a matter of some debate whether being in solidarity with someone necessarily involves the thought that they have been wronged. I myself incline towards the view that it does not. In particular, we can stand in solidarity with those who suffer from a natural disaster or misfortune.⁷ But I also take it to be uncontroversial that the existence of injustice is a paradigmatic reason to stand in solidarity with others, and that solidarity which arises in response to injustice is a paradigmatic form of that relationship. We might call this form of solidarity *moral* solidarity, to

⁷ For further defense, see Zhao (2019).

emphasize that not just the relationship itself, but also its target, is morally valenced. This form of solidarity is my central focus in this paper (though I drop the ‘moral’ qualifier in what follows).

Finally, we should also distinguish between symmetric and asymmetric solidarity relationships. Members of a union can be in solidarity with one another. This relationship is symmetric. A group of American students might be in solidarity with Palestinians. Here the solidarity relationship runs in one direction only. Call the first kind of relationship *internal* solidarity, since, at least paradigmatically, it holds between individuals that are part of the same group, or between groups that are part of a broader coalition. And call the second kind of relationship *external* solidarity, since, at least paradigmatically, those who are in one-way solidarity with others are not themselves affected by the relevant injustice, and are expressing their support from an outsider’s perspective.

This distinction is crucial for our purposes. When assessing the relative merits of seeking moral understanding or relying on moral testimony within relationships of solidarity, we need to be clear on which of these two kinds of relationships we have in mind.

I will argue that moral understanding is importantly valuable within *both* kinds of relationships, but it is worth noting that one of these views might seem to face more of an uphill battle than the other. After all, the claim that we ought to rely on the moral testimony of those with whom we stand in solidarity seems especially plausible when construed as a claim about relationships of external solidarity.

Since reliance on moral testimony seems especially appropriate within relationships of external solidarity, I will spend the bulk of the paper arguing that, even there, there are strong reasons to seek moral understanding. But first, I provide two arguments which illustrate the value of moral understanding within relationships of internal solidarity.

2. Internal Solidarity: Shared Moral Understanding as Bond and as Power

Members of a group can be united by bonds of solidarity. They can be in solidarity with one another. For instance, the renters of a neighborhood might form a group to resist the growing gentrification of their neighborhood and the increasingly unaffordable cost of rent. Members of the group perform various actions out of solidarity towards one another: they help others draft legal documents contesting renovations or rent hikes, accompany other residents to court when they have hearings, and put pressure on local representatives to enact stronger laws to protect renters.⁸

This is a paradigmatic example of individuals who are united against an injustice that affects them all (even if it affects some of them more seriously than others). It is not especially plausible to think of the members of such a group as deferring to other moral agents about whether renovations are wrong, or whether the increasingly unaffordable cost of rent is unjust. Rather, it is more plausible to think that the epistemic bond which unites the members of this group is, instead, a *shared* understanding of the many things that are wrong with the situation faced by renters in their neighborhood. That is, it is more plausible to think that the members of this group share moral understanding: of what is wrong with renovations, unjust about increasingly unaffordable cost of rent, bad about gentrification, and so on.

The renters who stand in solidarity with one another have reason to value this shared moral understanding. They have reason to value that particular way of standing united with others against an injustice that affects them all. Just as a friendship is made valuable by the attitudes that friends have for each other (e.g. attitudes of mutual concern), so too solidarity is made valuable by the

⁸ Throughout this section, ‘solidarity’ unqualified refers to internal solidarity.

attitudes of its members. Only, the attitudes which make solidarity valuable are not limited to the attitudes that its members have towards each other. Part of what makes solidarity valuable is also a shared understanding of what its members stand in solidarity *against*. Those who stand in solidarity, when they are getting things right, understand a part of moral reality together. When solidarity embodies a shared moral understanding of the injustice its members stand united against, that is part of what makes such a relationship valuable.⁹

To help bring out this idea, notice that the *process* of coming to such a shared moral understanding is intimately related to the process by which those very solidarity relationships are forged. Consider what things look like before any renters union such as the one I have described exists. Individual renters face particular injustices alone: they have to pay increasingly unaffordable rent, they are intimidated by landlords trying to evict them. Many individuals who face these injustices have some moral understanding of the injustice they face. They don't need to be told that their landlord's intimidation tactics are wrong: they understand this firsthand. Thus, at this point in time, there is a lot of moral understanding out there. But much of it may still be inchoate, and each instance of moral understanding, like the individual who possesses it, is isolated from the moral understanding of others.

Solidarity relationships begin to come into existence when people see their own moral understanding *reflected* in others. I realize that others are outraged at the way they are being treated by their landlord, in just the same way I am. There is important value in this already. When we see our moral understanding reflected in each other, we immediately understand one another. I

⁹ Since understanding is factive, there is no shared moral understanding (in my sense) when moral agents band together against a pseudo-injustice.

understand your outrage, and you understand mine, precisely because they are responses to the same kind of injustice.¹⁰

Moreover, having one's own moral understanding reflected in others can also *change* that understanding. It can deepen it. When I realize that the particular injustices I face are not unique to me, but rather ones that many others face as well, I come to understand what is wrong with the way I am treated in a way that is sensitive to its generality.¹¹ For instance, I may come to see that it is not only my landlord's conduct that is wrong, but also the laws which condone that conduct, and enable other landlords to treat renters in the same way.

Finally, this very moral understanding, deepened through the recognition of the same moral understanding in others, is one which I come to share with them. We come to understand, together, what is unjust about the conditions we together face.

I take this story to explain not only how solidarity can come into existence, but also why it is valuable. Each step in the story draws our attention to the distinctly epistemic aspects of solidarity's value: the value of seeing one's own individual moral understanding reflected in others, of coming to a deeper moral understanding through seeing it reflected in this way, and, finally, of coming to share this deeper understanding with others.¹² Solidarity, at its best, involves this mutual recognition of genuine moral understanding, in which we together understand what is wrong about the moral conditions we together face. Call this the *Reflection Argument* for the value of moral understanding within relations of internal solidarity.

¹⁰ See Bailey (2022) on the value of interpersonal understanding.

¹¹ Thompson (1963); Honneth (1996: 160-170). The idea of coming to a deeper moral understanding through seeing one's own understanding reflected in others is also a central theme of work on consciousness-raising (MacKinnon 1989).

¹² In some cases, that deeper moral understanding may already be accessible to many. In these cases, we come to share this deeper moral understanding with others simply by being made aware that they have it too.

Against the Reflection Argument, one might object that there is something especially valuable about standing in solidarity with others *despite* not fully understanding the merits of their claims. For instance, imagine that a group of graduate students are on strike at university Z. Two groups stand in solidarity with them: graduate students at university W, and construction workers currently contracted by university Z. The construction workers share moral understanding with the graduate students at university Z at a very general level: they understand the general injustice of having one's working conditions determined by employers who hold too much power over workers. But they fail to understand how some particular demands made by the graduate student union (e.g., for better wages, or childcare on campus) are responses to an injustice. On these points, they simply defer to the moral testimony of the graduate students. There is a sense in which the construction workers seem *more admirable* than the graduate students at university W. They refuse to cross the picket line, foregoing their wages, despite not fully understanding the particular injustices against which the graduate students are striking. This seems to suggest that the absence of moral understanding can make solidarity more valuable, rather than less.¹³

I think we should draw a different lesson about this case. The lesson we should draw is not that the absence of moral understanding makes solidarity more valuable, but rather that the absence of moral understanding makes it more *difficult* to stand in solidarity with others. It is harder to forego a day's wages in defense of a cause whose particular merits one does not fully understand. When the construction workers refuse to cross the picket line, they overcome a difficulty which the graduate students at university W do not face. That is why their actions are especially admirable, and why the graduate students at university Z should be especially grateful for their support. But from this it does not follow the construction workers' lack of moral understanding

¹³ I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this wonderful example.

makes the solidarity relationship between them and the graduate students more valuable. If the construction workers came to understand the particular injustices that the graduate students face, over years of mutual support and long conversations on the picket lines, everyone would welcome rather than regret this change. Their relationship takes a turn for the better, not for the worse, when the workers and the students come to appreciate that the particular injustices each faces are instances of a shared predicament. In this solidarity relationship as in others, people have reason to value coming to a shared moral understanding of the injustice they together face.

Such shared moral understanding also gives the *motive* of solidarity its particular shape. In the case with which I began, the renters who help others draft legal documents contesting evictions, or who accompany them to court, are acting out of solidarity with other renters. Their actions are obviously not motivated by mere self-interest. Less obviously, perhaps, they are also not best described as acts of beneficence. The moral agents I have described are not motivated simply by a concern to make other people better off.¹⁴ Rather, they are motivated to assist other renters who, like them, suffer at the hands of landlords and soaring housing prices. As a renter standing in solidarity with other renters, I oppose not merely my own eviction, nor only the eviction of others, but rather the eviction of renters in general, I being one of them.

Acting on the motive of solidarity thus seems to involve a responsiveness to a particular kind of moral reason: a reason to assist one another in resisting an injustice that we together face. In some cases, this moral reason may have the strength of a duty. We may owe it to one another to stand in solidarity with each other.

We thus need to distinguish two levels at which those who stand in solidarity with one another might share moral understanding. First, those who stand in solidarity with one another

¹⁴ Cf. Wiggins 2009.

share a moral understanding of the injustice that they together face. Second, those who stand in solidarity with one another may also share a moral understanding of the duties which this collective realization brings in its tow. They may understand that they owe it to each other to resist the general injustice they together face.

Shared understanding of this second kind is also something which members of a solidarity relationship have reason to value. It grounds a particular form of collective *power*, and this form of collective power is a central part of what makes solidarity valuable in the first place.

Here is a stylized example of what I have in mind. Suppose a thousand workers are on strike for better working conditions. To try to break the strike, the employer tells the workers that the first hundred workers who return to work will receive a substantial pay increase. Suppose further that it is significantly in each worker's self-interest to accept the employer's offer before others do, because each worker stands to gain significantly more from accepting the pay increase than what they can reasonably expect to gain from continuing the strike.

I take it that, even though there are strong self-interested reasons for each worker to accept the employer's offer, the workers nevertheless owe it to one another not to accept it. Anyone who accepted the offer would thereby sever the bonds of solidarity that unite them with others. That action severs the bonds of solidarity because it betrays the goal that they owe it to each other to pursue: resisting the general injustice they together face. Accepting the employer's offer does nothing to improve the working conditions of workers in general. On the contrary, it actively thwarts that aim. If someone accepted the offer, it would be appropriate for other workers to blame or resent them. Blame or resentment, in such a case, is the response to the violation of a moral duty: the duty, which those who stand in solidarity owe to each other, to resist the injustice which they together face.

The crucial point, for our purposes, is this: when the members of a group understand the importance of these duties, their power, as a group, is greater. If we understand the importance of the duty that we owe to each other, to improve *our* working conditions, no one will take the divisive offer seriously. After all, accepting the offer does nothing to further that goal and actively hinders it. When moral agents understand the importance of resisting the injustice which they together face, it is much harder to pit their individual interests against one another. That, in turn, confers power to the collective agent they make up.

Part of the value of internal solidarity, indeed perhaps even its core value, lies precisely in the power that it confers to collectives whose members are united by bonds of solidarity.¹⁵ One thing that contributes to this power is when individuals share an understanding of the duty to resist the general injustice which they together face. Thus, a shared moral understanding of what solidarity requires is part of what makes internal solidarity valuable in the first place. Call this the *Power Argument* for the value of moral understanding within relations of internal solidarity.

To clarify, my argument is not just that a shared moral understanding of the duties of solidarity is *instrumentally* valuable, as a means of achieving our collective ends. It is instrumentally valuable, of course, but so are many other things. We can imagine a different version of the case in which most of the workers are, at first, genuinely unsure whether or not there would be anything wrong with accepting the divisive offer. They only refrain from doing so because their union leaders, or someone else whose moral judgment they trust, tells them that it would be wrong. In principle, deferring to one's leaders might be just as effective a means of acting in our collective interest. But were this how members of the group arrived at their decision, we would conclude that the bonds of solidarity within the group are weaker, not stronger. After all,

¹⁵ See also Zheng (2022) for a view on which solidarity just *is* a form of collective power.

what saves the day in this version of the case is just the moral judgment of a few, rather than the importance, to all, of solidarity itself.

What this comparison brings out, I take it, is that solidarity is valuable also for its own sake, as a distinct form of collective power. Solidarity is valuable as a form of collective power that is exercised through a shared moral understanding of what it requires of its members. Whether or not we are successful in our aims, we have reason to value aiming at a collective goal together—that of resisting an injustice that affects us all—from a shared understanding that we owe it to each other to do so. When we do so, we realize a form of collective power that is based on the mutual recognition of reciprocal obligations, and *that* form of power is valuable for its own sake, beyond what it may succeed in bringing about.

I have been arguing that shared moral understanding is valuable within relations of internal solidarity, in the strong sense that the value of shared moral understanding within such relationships sheds light on the value of solidarity itself. First, solidarity is valuable in part because it embodies a shared moral understanding of the injustice we together stand against. Second, a shared moral understanding of the duty to resist that injustice grounds a distinctly valuable form of power: the power of solidarity. Thus, in these two closely connected ways, we have strong reasons to value sharing moral understanding with those with whom we stand in reciprocated relations of solidarity.

3. Interlude: External Solidarity and Epistemic Asymmetry

The arguments of the previous section are, at least as I presented them, limited to relations of internal solidarity. Yet as I hinted at earlier, one might agree that moral understanding plays an

important role within relations of internal solidarity, while insisting that things are very different when solidarity is non-symmetric, and those who stand in solidarity with others are on the outside looking in.

The rationale for thinking that relations of internal and external solidarity call for asymmetrical treatment is precisely that the latter but not the former involves an important *epistemic* asymmetry. Those who suffer at the hands of an injustice are, plausibly, more knowledgeable about that injustice than those who aren't similarly affected by it.¹⁶

This epistemic asymmetry, in turn, may be taken to cast doubt on the importance of seeking moral understanding in the context of external solidarity. In particular, it may be taken to suggest that as far as the norms of external solidarity are concerned, moral agents ought to rely on the moral testimony of those they are in solidarity with (by deferring to them about what is unjust and why). On this picture, then, external solidarity requires that we defer to the moral testimony of those with whom we stand in solidarity, but it does not require that we try to understand the moral reasons behind the claims we are invited to accept.¹⁷ Call this the 'all-out' deference view of external solidarity.

In the next two sections, I raise two problems for this view. The problems I raise do not call into question the idea that those who suffer at the hands of an injustice are more knowledgeable about that injustice. Rather, I will argue that even if the epistemic asymmetry thesis is correct, we still have strong reasons to reject the all-out deference view. Even within relations of external solidarity, solidarity requires us to seek moral understanding.

¹⁶ See Scholz 2008: 159 ff.; McKinnon 2017; Toole 2022.

¹⁷ Rachel McKinnon, for instance, writes: "'Allies' ought to *put their own perceptions largely aside*, and trust the testimony of the marginalized person" (2017: 171). In a similar vein, Eric Wiland (2017, 2021) argues that, in solidarity relations, it's *better* to accept moral testimony than arrive at moral views on your own. See also Kolers (2016: 54 ff.).

4. External Solidarity: The Conflict Argument

Civil law in France bans young girls from wearing the hijab in school, and also forbids state employees and professional athletes from wearing the hijab. Many French Feminists support the ban. On their view, the hijab is a sexist tool of oppression that is inconsistent with basic norms of gender equality that French institutions ought to uphold. Many Muslim women disagree. To them, it is the ban that is oppressive, since it violates their freedom of religion and signals yet another expression of anti-Islam cultural racism.¹⁸

When there is moral disagreement at the level of a society, we can expect some individuals to receive conflicting moral testimony. Thus, let us suppose that Paul has received conflicting moral testimony about whether the law banning the hijab in various public spaces is morally justified. Myriam has told Paul that the law is justified because these symbols are sexist, whereas Noor has told him that the law is morally wrong because it discriminates against Muslims.

What does the all-out deference view of external solidarity recommend to Paul? On the one hand, Paul would like to defer to Myriam, so as to be in solidarity with her against patriarchy. On the other hand, Paul would also like to defer to Noor, so as to be in solidarity with her against anti-Islam cultural racism.¹⁹ But, of course, Paul cannot defer to both. He cannot both believe that the law is morally justified and that it is morally wrong.

More plausibly, what the all-out deference view requires in this case is for Paul to give equal weight to the testimony of both Myriam and Noor. Paul ought to abstain from using his own moral understanding, and instead allow their testimony together to determine what doxastic attitude he should adopt. Since each piece of moral testimony is worthy of being trusted, together

¹⁸ Cf. Göle (2015).

¹⁹ In this section and the next, 'solidarity' unqualified refers to external solidarity.

the two pieces of testimony cancel one another out. What the all-out deference view requires, then, is for Paul to suspend judgment on whether or not the law is morally justified. Remaining neutral on whether the law is just or unjust, the all-out deference view says, is exactly what solidarity requires.

This is a not an especially good outcome for the all-out deference view. By suspending judgment on whether or not the law is morally justified, Paul is in effect *disengaging* from the moral conflict. He settles on neutrality because others have not settled the matter for him. The result is that Paul stands in solidarity with no one.

The problem that Paul faces can be generalized. If external solidarity requires moral deference, and moral deference requires giving equal (or similar) weight to conflicting pieces of moral testimony, then, in every case in which you receive conflicting moral testimony, external solidarity will *require* being in solidarity with no one. In other words, the recommendation of all-out moral deference is self-undermining as an account of external solidarity. Call this the *Disengagement Problem*, since the problem here seems to be that, in a wide range of cases, the all-out deference view recommends agents to disengage from moral conflict, which is in direct opposition with the ideal of solidarity. After all, cases of social conflict are precisely those in which solidarity is most sorely needed.

To avoid the Disengagement Problem, it might be thought that Paul should simply *choose sides*, and defer to the moral testimony of whichever side he has chosen. Is this a good solution? This will depend on the whether there is a good process available to Paul, for clearly not all ways of choosing sides are morally acceptable. For instance, one thing Paul should *not* do is flip a coin in order to decide whose moral testimony to trust. This is morally risky, since Paul runs the risk of ending up being in solidarity with a group that supports an injustice. It is also morally disrespectful,

since, intuitively, one shouldn't decide important moral questions, like the question of whose side to take in a moral conflict, just by tossing a coin. Moreover, the disrespect at issue here seems to undermine the solidarity relationship. If Noor knew that Paul stood in solidarity with her against the anti-veil law only because the coin landed tails, it would be reasonable for Noor to reject Paul's claim that he stands in solidarity with her. Call this the *Flippancy Problem* for chance-based responses to conflicting moral testimony.

A natural suggestion, at this point, might be that Paul should choose sides on the basis of the identities of the speakers, or of the groups of which they are members. So, for instance, it might be thought that, all else equal, one should trust the moral testimony of those who are worse off, or who are the more oppressed.²⁰ Reasoning this way, we might conclude that Paul should defer to Noor's moral testimony, given that Noor, as a Muslim woman, is subject to a greater range of oppression. Call this the *Differentiation Strategy*.

This would be a neat solution, if identity groups always spoke in a unified voice. The problem, of course, is that they do not. Many feminist Muslim women in France also *support* the anti-veil law.²¹ In fact, although I didn't tell you earlier, Myriam too is a Muslim woman. So, as it turns out, the Differentiation Strategy was really never available to Paul in the first place. We thus seem to have worked our way back to the Disengagement Problem. Since Myriam and Noor are equally worthy of being deferred to, even by the lights of the Differentiation Strategy, the all-out deference view recommends giving their testimony equal weight. By following the recommendations of the all-out deference view, Paul finds himself taking a neutral stance, and being in solidarity with no one.

²⁰ Koler 2016: ch. 5.

²¹ <https://www.marianne.net/agora/tribunes-libres/le-voile-est-sexiste-et-obscurantiste-l-appel-de-100-musulmanes-de-france>

As I pointed out earlier, the Disengagement Problem is especially vexing, because removing oneself from a moral conflict seems to be the very opposite of what solidarity requires. Calls for solidarity are calls for others to be involved.²² If a view of solidarity requires moral agents to remain neutral in cases of moral conflict, then that view is at least partly self-undermining. Thus, the fact that the all-out deference view runs into the Disengagement Problem is a strong objection against this view.²³

The threat of disengagement, in turn, brings out the importance of seeking moral understanding within relations of external solidarity. Moral agents like Paul have reason to want to understand what the morally relevant considerations in a moral conflict are, how they weigh against one another, and which ones are more important. After all, if Paul understood why the anti-veil law is morally unjustified (which it is),²⁴ he would have no difficulty choosing who to be in solidarity with: he would stand in solidarity with Noor. But notice that, if Paul understood why the anti-veil law is morally unjustified, he would no longer have to take Noor's word for it that the law is unjustified. He could, instead, add his voice to hers, by opposing the law for the reasons why it is wrong.

Since it would be good if Paul understood why the anti-veil law is morally unjustified, it's reasonable to think that he should *try* to gain this understanding. This may well require a great deal of patience, thoughtfulness, as well as a ready attentiveness on Paul's part to learn from others.²⁵ It may be hard work. But hard though it may be, Paul's trying to understand whether the anti-veil

²² Harvey 2007.

²³ Another way not to disengage from a conflict would be to take both sides in the conflict. For instance, Paul might attend protests supporting the ban and protests opposing it. This strategy won't be viable in the long run, since some situations will call for incompatible actions (e.g., you can't be part of a protest and its counter-protest), but it may be perfectly viable as a way for Paul to learn more about the issue at hand.

²⁴ Maybe you disagree with me on this point. That's okay. My argument here doesn't rely on the claim that the anti-veil law is unjustified. It only relies on there being a right answer to whether the law is justified or not.

²⁵ On the importance of listening to others with an eye towards coming to a better understanding of moral matters, see Thomas 1993 and Harvey 2007.

law is justified or not seems clearly preferable to his disengaging from the moral conflict entirely. It is preferable, moreover, from the point of view of solidarity. Paul's reasons to seek moral understanding are reasons of solidarity: reasons whose normative force is explained by the value of the solidarity relation (with Noor, against the anti-veil law) in which Paul ought to stand.²⁶

Against this, it may be objected that Paul shouldn't even try to understand whether the anti-veil law is justified or not, on the grounds that people on the outside of an injustice are simply not competent enough to work through the moral considerations that are relevant to that injustice. That is, it might be thought that, even Paul tried in good faith to understand whether the anti-veil law is justified or not, he wouldn't be any more likely to figure out who he should be in solidarity with than if he flipped a coin. If using your moral understanding won't yield better results than a coin, what's the point of trying to understand?

One line of response to this objection is that it is overly pessimistic. Morality, to be sure, is hard, and well-meaning people make moral mistakes. But that doesn't mean good faith attempts to work through out even thorny moral issues are no better than random. In fact, it seems to me that something like the opposite is true: a dearth of moral thoughtfulness about various kinds of injustice is part of what helps perpetuate those injustice.

But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Paul is no more likely to figure out who he should be in solidarity with by trying to better understand the moral issue at hand, than if he were to flip a coin. *Still*, it seems to me that it would be decisively better if Paul tried to understand whether the anti-veil law is unjust. After all, even though both strategies involve moral risk, flipping a coin is disrespectful in addition to being morally risky, and disrespectful in a way that

²⁶ Of course, from Paul's perspective, when he sets out to try to understand whether the anti-veil law is morally justified or not, he does not know which solidarity relation ultimately explains his reasons for doing so.

undermines claims to standing in solidarity with someone. Good faith attempts to understand a moral issue are not similarly disrespectful. They leave room for genuine solidarity.

5. External Solidarity: The Unfair Burden Argument

The Conflict Argument has traction only in cases that are morally complex and in which agents receive conflicting moral testimony. Not all cases of moral testimony will be like this. A restricted version of the all-out deference view might thus say that we should rely on the moral testimony of those we ought to be in solidarity with, so long as that testimony doesn't conflict with testimony from other moral agents who also have some claim to our support. The rationale for this version of the all-out-deference view would still be the same as before. By relying on the moral testimony of others, I acknowledge the epistemic superiority that they have in virtue of the experience of the relevant injustice that they possess and I lack.

In the background is the idea that experience can confer expertise over a range of moral facts. For instance, in Karen Jones' case, Peter is living in a fourteen-person co-op and part of a group interviewing potential new members for the co-op.²⁷ After one interview, Peter's female housemates tell Peter that they should reject the applicant because he behaved in a sexist way. Peter himself didn't see anything sexist about the way the applicant behaved, but he recognizes that his housemates are better judges in that matter and accepts their testimony. As Wiland points out, accepting their testimony isn't just a way for Peter to improve the accuracy of his moral

²⁷ Jones (1999).

beliefs. It also a way of showing respect towards them.²⁸ Or, as the all-out deference view would have it, it is a way of being in solidarity with them.

But now let us add the following detail about Peter, which is that Peter has a standing intention always to rely on his roommates, and the other women he knows, about whether a token act was sexist. That is, Peter has no intention to understand which kinds of behavior are sexist and why. As a result, Peter seldom forms judgments on his own about whether a token act was sexist, and he is no better at spotting instances of sexist behavior than he was when he first joined the cop five years ago. It's not that Peter doesn't care whether a given behavior is sexist or not. He is very much against it. It's just that he prefers relying on the moral testimony of those who, in virtue of their experience, know better.

When we fill out Peter's case in this way, it is much less obvious that Peter is managing his moral beliefs in the right way. What has gone wrong? One explanation, in keeping with the framing assumption I highlighted at the outset of this paper, is that Peter is failing in his duties of self-improvement as a moral agent. That is, Peter is failing to realize a regulatory ideal of individual moral agency, by allowing his moral beliefs to depend to such a significant extent on the moral understanding of others. However, this strikes me as the wrong explanation of what is problematic about Peter's attitudes. Peter's standing intention to rely solely on the moral testimony of his roommates seems disrespectful to them. That attitude of his is something that they could reasonably object to: Why should it be up to *them* to manage his moral beliefs about sexism for him?

On reflection, this is somewhat puzzling. If it is a mark of *respect*, in the original version of the case, for Peter to rely on his roommates' testimony about whether the applicant behaved in

²⁸ Wiland (2021: 102).

a sexist way, how could it be disrespectful for Peter to intend to always rely on their testimony? How could it be disrespectful to intend to repeat instances of something that expresses respect? When I rely on Dr. Fauci's testimony in coming to believe that a vaccine is safe, I thereby show respect for his expertise. When I also intend to keep relying on his testimony about whether any other vaccines in the future are safe, that is equally respectful. What explains the difference between the two types of cases?

Here is, at the most general level, what I think is going wrong in my variation of the Peter case. The problem is not with identifying some people—those who suffer at the hands of patriarchy—as experts about an area of morality. Rather, the problem is that Peter is treating himself as a *layperson*. The layperson's job, in an expert-layperson division of epistemic labor, is to figure out who the experts are, and rely on their testimony. Our relation to scientific experts is like this. But our relation to moral experts is not. There may be moral experts, but there are no moral laypersons. Our role as moral agents is not that of being a passive recipient of expert knowledge.

Moreover, and most importantly for our purposes, behaving like a moral layperson undermines the relationship of external solidarity. Suppose that a female student in Peter's seminar, Corinne, regularly makes insightful observations, or asks important questions, which, the male professor politely listens to but doesn't follow up on. Invariably, some male student will later recycle the same observation, or ask the same question, to which the male professor will now enthusiastically respond. If Peter needs moral testimony in order to know that the professor's behavior towards Corinne is sexist, some courses of action won't be salient to him. It won't occur to Peter to speak up and point out that the observation in question has been made by Corinne

already, awkward though that may be for the professor who initially ignored it and the student who recycled it. Indeed, for all we know, that student may very well be Peter himself.

This case illustrates two potential problems, depending on which position we imagine Peter to occupy. As a third-party or bystander, Peter's lack of moral understanding prevents him from seeing anything wrong about the way that Corinne's contributions are taken up. This, in turn, prevents him from performing actions in solidarity with Corinne, against the ambient sexism of the seminar room. As a contributing agent, Peter's lack of moral understanding makes it likely that he himself will perform actions that are sexist or that contribute to the ambient sexism of his environment. On either count, Peter's decision to rely exclusively on the moral testimony of those who know better about sexism ends up undermining his attempt to stand in solidarity with them.²⁹

Taking a step back, we can put the general problem in terms of a dilemma. If Peter does not seek to understand for himself what kinds of conduct are sexist, he has two options in any particular case: he can seek and rely on moral testimony, or he can omit forming any moral beliefs at all. Relying on moral testimony across the board is disrespectful. It contributes to an unfair division of epistemic labor, one in which those who suffer from an injustice must in addition manage the beliefs of others. To avoid contributing to an unfair division of epistemic labor, Peter might instead refrain from seeking moral testimony, simply omitting to form any beliefs about sexism in a range of cases. Yet failing to form beliefs, as we have just seen, has its own pitfalls. When Peter remains ignorant about token instances of sexism, he takes himself out of the picture as someone who might act in solidarity against these particular instances of sexism. If Peter does not speak up against particular sexist acts, someone else will have to. *Either way*, then, Peter places unnecessary burdens onto others—of managing his moral beliefs, or speaking up against sexist

²⁹ I adopt the distinction between bystanders and contributing agents from Harvey (2015).

behavior. By failing to seek moral understanding, Peter fails to pull his weight as an agent standing in solidarity with others. Call this the *Unfair Burden Argument* for the importance of moral understanding within relations of external solidarity.

It is instructive to compare the argument I have just provided with a superficially similar argument for the importance of moral understanding. As Alison Hills points out, you generally need moral understanding in order to reliably act rightly. The reason why you need moral understanding, Hills argues, is that, “while in principle you might keep your moral guru by your side at all times to advise you”, in practice that is not likely to happen.³⁰

The argument I have given warrants a much stronger conclusion. The problem is not just that *in practice* it is not likely that others will always be in a position to advise Peter on whether an action is sexist. The problem rather is that it is not their job to manage his moral beliefs for him. An epistemic division of labor in which those who suffer at the hands of patriarchy (the ‘experts’) must manage the moral beliefs of those who purport to stand in solidarity with them (the ‘laypersons’) is *in principle* an unfair division of labor.³¹ That is why Peter’s decision to rely exclusively on the moral testimony of who know better about sexism is disrespectful.

The Unfair Burden Argument can also be instructively compared to the argument that moral understanding is valuable because you need it in order to be able to justify yourself to others. As Robert Hopkins points out, if you believe that some action is right merely on the basis of testimony, you won’t be able to justify that moral belief to others (at least not on the basis of the reasons why that belief is true).³² For instance, suppose that Peter is a member of a union that is currently voting on whether to ratify a contract or continue their ongoing strike. Among the central

³⁰ Hills (2009: 106).

³¹ Cf. Berenstain (2016); Taiwo (2020).

³² Hopkins (2007: 603). See also Hills (2009: 106-8).

points of disagreement is whether the contract does enough to protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace. Some of Peter's female co-workers have told him that they believe the contract ought to be rejected, and Peter accepts their moral testimony. According to Hopkins, Peter has no right to the belief that the contract ought to be rejected, given that he cannot justify his decision to vote against the contract on moral grounds. Peter cannot, as it were, adequately defend his decision when pressed to explain why he believes the contract ought to be rejected. For this reason, Hopkins thinks, Peter is not entitled to that belief.

Even if Hopkins were right about this, the lack of an entitlement to a belief is hardly the most significant drawback of Peter's inability to justify his decision on moral grounds. The most significant drawback is that Peter is unable to perform actions that need to be performed on behalf of those with whom he purports to stand in solidarity. Who will explain, to those who are undecided, or fearful of a longer strike, or skeptical that a better contract can be won, why the current contract on the table ought to be rejected? Not Peter, of course, nor anyone who, like him, decides to rely exclusively on the testimony of their female co-workers. The bulk of the work will fall, instead, onto the very people whom Peter, by relying on their testimony, wanted to be in solidarity with. But this division of labor is clearly unfair. Why should only those who stand to be most harmed by the contract have to do all the work of explaining to others why the contract ought to be rejected? Once again, Peter's reliance on the moral testimony of his female co-workers undermines his attempt to be in solidarity with them. Being in solidarity with those who stand to suffer the most from the contract requires more than just deferring to them that the contract ought to be rejected. It also requires trying to understand why the contract ought to be rejected, so that one may contribute to bringing it about that the contract is in fact rejected, by working to help others appreciate the moral reasons why the contract ought to be rejected. Peter's inability to do

this is the most significant drawback of his inability to justify his decision to others on moral grounds. His lack of moral understanding contributes to an unfair division of epistemic labor, and thereby undermines the relationship of solidarity he purports to stand in.

In this section, I have provided a second argument for the value of moral understanding within relationships of external solidarity. Agents in external solidarity have moral reasons to try to acquire moral understanding about the relevant injustice that they want to stand in solidarity against. These moral reasons are significant because they are reasons of fairness. If we do not try to acquire moral understanding, leaving others do the work for us instead, we contribute to a division of epistemic labor that is needlessly burdensome to those very individuals with whom we purport to stand in solidarity.

6. Conclusion

Because moral understanding involves a distinctly first-personal grasp of moral matters, there is a temptation to think of its value primarily in terms of achievements that reflect well on its possessor: the moral worth of one's action, or the virtue of one's character. However, these explanations fail to do full justice to the importance of moral understanding in our moral lives. An understanding of moral matters is also centrally valuable in our relations with other moral agents, as illustrated by the role of such understanding in relations of solidarity. As agents standing in internal solidarity with one another, we have reason to value our together understanding the injustice which we together resist. As agents standing in external solidarity with others, we have reason to seek out

moral understanding of the injustice we purport to stand against, lest we place unfair burdens on the very people we claim to support, or disengage from social conflicts altogether.

In closing, let me briefly return to the debate I mentioned at the outset of this paper, regarding the status of accepting moral testimony. The view that naturally emerges from the arguments I have considered is the following: there is nothing wrong with forming beliefs on the basis of moral testimony, but when we do, we should also try to understand the reasons behind the moral claims we thereby come to accept. Moreover, I have defended a version of this view on which our reasons to accept moral testimony and seek moral understanding may often be *the very same reasons*—reasons of solidarity. Far from serving competing moral ideals, moral testimony and moral understanding are thus best seen as natural points in the progress of moral inquiry, both aimed at some of the same moral goods, solidarity being one of them.

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