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Iris Murdoch, Privacy, and the Limits of Moral Testimony

Abstract

Recent discussions of moral testimony have focused on the acceptability of forming beliefs on the basis of moral testimony, but there has been little acknowledgement of the limits to testimony's capacity to convey moral knowledge. In this paper I outline one such limit, drawing on Iris Murdoch's (1956, 1970) conception of private moral concepts. Such concepts, I suggest, plausibly play an important role in moral thought, and yet moral knowledge expressed in them cannot be testimonially acquired.

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Testimony is widely thought to be a significant source of knowledge. It is also widely agreed to be a possible source of specifically moral knowledge: simply by telling another person a moral truth, one can put them in a position to know that it is the case. ‘Pessimists’ about moral testimony are sceptical about its worth and think that we should be hesitant about accepting it. Since they too tend to think that moral knowledge *can* be acquired via testimony, they tend to motivate rejecting it (at least in some cases, or more often than non-moral testimony) in one of two ways. First, some pessimists argue for ‘unusability’ theses, suggesting that although moral testimony can make moral knowledge available to us, there are good reasons not to make use of it.ⁱ Second, some pessimists have suggested that moral understanding rather than moral knowledge is or should be our primary epistemic aim in the moral domain. Combined with the idea that testimony does not make moral understanding available to us, this can motivate rejecting dependence on moral testimony in at least some cases.ⁱⁱ Both of these responses, then, give reasons to reject testimony, but not to doubt that moral knowledge *can* be acquired via testimony.

Despite this pessimism about the value of moral testimony, however, little has been said about the *limits* to moral testimony’s capacity to give us moral knowledge (barring the acknowledgement that it seems ill-suited to conveying know-how or abilities). Even if testimony is a way of attaining *some* moral knowledge, it may not be well-suited to conveying *all* kinds of it. This paper is an attempt to explore one such limit to moral testimony. I will suggest that Iris Murdoch gives plausible reasons for thinking that some moral concepts require a grasp that extends beyond their public use and can be ‘private’. If this is so, there is no guarantee that knowledge involving such concepts can be testimonially conveyed. Indeed, as we will see,

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Murdoch's notion of private concepts suggests that some moral knowledge will be *impossible* to pass on via testimony, because we will not converge upon the same moral concepts.

In §1 I discuss what counts as moral testimony, and in §2 I examine the requirements that must be met for such testimony to be successful (that is, for it to result in the hearer *knowing* the claim in question). In §3 I turn to Murdoch's work on private concepts and suggest that she gives good reason to think that some moral concepts will be private. In §4 I argue that the privacy of some moral concepts suggests that the ability of moral testimony to convey moral knowledge is more limited than has thus far been acknowledged.

1. Moral Testimony and Pure Moral Testimony

Moral testimony is testimony with explicitly moral content, such as being told 'X is a cruel person', 'You ought to do *y*', or 'Z was a generous thing to do'. Such testimony is intended to directly convey something about how things stand morally, rather than doing so indirectly – for example, by offering relevant non-moral information. So, although telling a friend 'Doing *x* would upset so-and-so' might convey morally relevant information, it would not count as moral testimony, whereas saying 'X would be an unkind thing to do' would count as offering moral testimony. Alison Hills (2009) offers the following example of moral testimony, which I will discuss below:

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. (Hills 2009: 94)

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Hills' example is an instance of *pure* moral testimony, and discussions of moral testimony have tended to focus on testimony of this kind. Pure moral testimony is moral testimony where the hearer's belief is wholly dependent on the authority of the speaker, rather than depending on evidence that a speaker might offer in favour of the belief.ⁱⁱⁱ That is, in these cases it is the testimony itself that is offered as evidence, not the content of the testimony. Sarah McGrath (2009) describes these cases as ones where "one in effect treats the person to whom one defers as having purely moral information that one lacks" (McGrath 2009: 322). Believing on the basis of pure moral testimony might initially seem odd, and the example of Eleanor believing that she ought to be vegetarian seems like a very strange interaction. But in the non-moral domain our dependence on such testimony looks both frequent and entirely unobjectionable. It is this kind of testimony, for example, that one might seek when asking a stranger for directions, or when trusting someone's word about the timing of a lecture.^{iv}

Moreover, though the strangely alienated example of moral testimony offered above seems odd, other examples of moral testimony seem to be part and parcel of our ordinary moral practises. Take, for example, the following cases from Paulina Sliwa (2012):

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.

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. (Sliwa 2012, 177-178)

In these cases, the agents in question face morally complex situations in which they're not sure how to act. Acknowledging this, and that they themselves may not be best placed to know how best to act, they decide to rely upon others and depend on their friends' testimony. Such reliance is seemingly common in everyday life.

Given that morally relevant testimony can involve relevant non-moral facts, or prompt the hearer to think about an issue for themselves, the testimony that counts as 'pure moral testimony' is a small proportion of the total testimony that is morally relevant. It is this kind of testimony that will be the focus of this paper. Testimony that provides relevant non-moral information (such as 'animals feel pain'), or that prompts the hearer to think about the issue for themselves, are largely regarded as unobjectionable. Pure moral testimony, on the other hand, has to many people seemed problematic. As I mentioned above, however, few if any have doubted that moral knowledge *can* be conveyed via pure moral testimony, and it has thus been a challenge to understand why such knowledge can seem undesirable or objectionable. In this paper, I will be suggesting that some areas of our moral knowledge are not apt to be testimonially acquired, at least by pure moral testimony. The scope of pure moral testimony, then, is much more limited than has been recognised thus far.

2. Requirements for Successful Moral Testimony

Clearly, not all attempts to convey moral knowledge via testimony will be successful. For testimony to be successful (i.e., for it to result in the hearer knowing the claim in question), various conditions need to hold: the speaker must themselves have the relevant knowledge, they must

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successfully communicate it to the hearer, the hearer must trust their testimony, and so on. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on successful communication. Successful communication requires that the speaker and the hearer at least share a set of concepts and can articulate them to one another. To take a non-moral example, imagine finding a samara, a leaf-like object that contains the seeds of the sycamore tree, and being told ‘That’s from a sycamore’. This is clearly a meaningful statement, and to certain hearers (*viz.*, those who have the concept ‘sycamore’), it can convey information about how the world is: the leaf-like object has grown from a sycamore tree, it contains the seeds of the tree, and so on. To others, the statement may fail to communicate anything at all: if one has no idea what a sycamore might be, then the thought that the object is ‘from a sycamore’ will add nothing to one’s conception of it. Or to take a practical example, imagine being given instructions on how to make bread: mix the ingredients, knead the dough, leave it to rise, and so on. One can only learn how to make bread on the basis of such instructions if one knows what the terms mean; if one has no idea what ‘kneading’ is, then one cannot learn how to make bread on the basis of instructions invoking that term, because this testimony will add nothing to one’s conception of how to make bread.

The same is true of moral testimony. For moral testimony to be successful, it must be successfully communicated to the hearer, and this requires that the speaker and hearer share moral concepts. So, to take the above example, if Eleanor has never heard of vegetarianism and her friend tells her only that she ‘ought to be vegetarian’, she will fail to acquire moral knowledge. And she will thus fail to know that she ought to be vegetarian even if all the other conditions for successful testimony hold (the truth of the claim, a knowledgeable speaker, trust in the speaker etc.). Eleanor cannot come to know that she ought to be vegetarian on the basis of her friend’s testimony because she lacks the relevant concept (*viz.*, ‘vegetarian’). In fact, Eleanor does not even need to lack the relevant concept altogether in order for the testimony to fail. An incorrect grasp of the term can also preclude her from gaining the relevant knowledge. If, say, Eleanor has

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incorrectly learned the meaning of the term ‘vegetarian’, and takes vegetarianism to involve abstaining from eating beef and eggs, she cannot know that she ‘ought to be vegetarian’ on the basis of her friend’s testimony, for she will not take this to mean the same thing that her friend did.

Fortunately, in most cases this barrier to successful testimony can be fairly easily overcome. So, for example, if one is told that the samara is ‘from a sycamore’, and one lacks the concept *sycamore*, then one can ask what a sycamore is, and thereby learn the meaning of the term. Similarly, simply asking what the friend means by ‘vegetarianism’ or what ‘kneading’ is would usually enable one to grasp the meaning of these terms in the other examples of testimony and thus to be in a position to know what is testified. This epistemic barrier to successful testimony can thus, at least in principle, be overcome. Some concepts may be complex or technical, and thus require great effort to be understood, but claims involving those concepts are at least in principle open to the hearer.

3. Murdoch on Private Moral Concepts

Iris Murdoch’s work suggests that there may be a deeper barrier to successful moral testimony than those mentioned thus far – a barrier that is not a merely incidental obstacle that can be overcome. This is because she rejects the general conception of moral concepts implicit in the view that it is possible to gain moral knowledge via pure moral testimony.

Instead, Murdoch claims that some moral concepts are importantly *private*. That is, she suggests that some moral concepts may be increasingly particular to given individuals, despite their making use of a public word. Some moral concepts, she claims, are not merely incidentally private but essentially so, and depend on a particular individual along with their historical context and their conception of that context to have their meaning. As I will go on to discuss, this would

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preclude the idea that the concepts can necessarily be shared, since individuals may lack the shared historical context and conception of their circumstances that would allow for the sharing of concepts. Knowledge expressed with the help of such concepts would not merely be difficult to transmit via testimony, but impossible, because the individuals would not have the shared concepts that are necessary for successful communication.

Murdoch's discussion of private moral concepts comes largely in the context of her rejection of the idea that all moral reasons are universalisable.^v She summarises the dominant view that she rejects as follows:

[A] moral judgment, as opposed to a whim or taste preference, is one which is supported by reasons held by the agent to be valid for all others placed as he, and which would involve the objective specification of the situation in terms of facts available to disinterested scrutiny. (Murdoch 1956: 34)

Contrary to the received wisdom of her time and ours, Murdoch suggests that not all moral concepts, and not all moral reasons, are universal.^{vi} That is, she rejects the idea that any moral reasons simply as such apply equally to all agents in the relevant circumstances, as well as the idea that any agent with basic moral and linguistic competence who looks at a situation with genuine 'disinterested scrutiny' will discern the same moral 'facts' as any other. These two claims are related, in that the claim that the same moral reasons apply to all agents in relevantly similar circumstances will seem attractive only if it is plausible that all agents can know of such reasons because they possess the same concepts. In rejecting the universality of moral reasons, Murdoch rejects the idea that we all can or ought to discern the very same moral world. This is because she rejects the universality of moral concepts, the idea that the same moral concepts apply equally to all and thus can (or should) be used by all.^{vii}

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The idea that moral concepts are essentially universal, Murdoch thinks, is bound up with the idea that all necessary moral concepts can be analysed ‘genetically’, the claim that moral concepts can be fully understood in terms of the *public* rules and norms for the use of the relevant words (which is, she assumes, the way in which the concepts are learnt). This is because the claim that moral concepts are universal will only seem appealing if the same moral concepts are (at least in principle) available to all. Genetic analysis of moral terms makes them available to any competent language user by only tying them down to publicly graspable rules and facts (i.e., those rules and facts that *anyone* would need to know in order to correctly apply the word). Murdoch thus links the thought that moral concepts are universal with the wider claim that the meaning of any moral word can be determined by examining its public usage. On this view, one is not guaranteed to have a grasp of any given word, but its meaning will always be potentially available to be grasped since it is given by something public.

Murdoch is not opposed to the idea that we *initially* come to understand many moral words by examining (or simply mimicking) their public usage. However, she strongly objects to the idea that moral concepts could be adequately grasped *solely* via determining the rules for public usage of the words. Rachael Wiseman (2020) writes:

The claim that ‘mental concepts must be analysed genetically’ is not the (mere) claim that to acquire mental concepts is to acquire techniques for the public use of words. It is this, plus the additional claim that the techniques learnt exhaust the meaning of mental concepts. As Murdoch puts it, it is the claim that ‘I do not “move on”’, that the ‘outer structure’ that characterises the public practice for the use of the word, and that I learn at the beginning of my life as a language-using animal, is (and remains) ‘the essence of the matter’ (IP 309). (Wiseman 2020: 228)

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Murdoch, Wiseman notes, is objecting not to the idea that public rules and norms have *some* role to play in our coming to grasp moral concepts but rather to the idea that there is no further ‘movement’, no further possible development, in our grasp of moral concepts. The view that Murdoch opposes is thus the view that the full meaning of moral concepts can be grasped by examining facts such as the rules for the correct use of the term and expectations regarding how the term is reflected in speaker’s outward behaviour. Whilst Murdoch allows that this may be relevant to determining the meaning of a moral concept, she denies that it need exhaust its meaning.^{viii}

In fact, Murdoch’s claim is stronger than this. She holds not only that the public rules and norms regarding a term (a ‘genetic analysis’ of it) *need not* exhaust the meaning of all moral terms, but that for mature moral agents it *should not* do so.^{ix} For Murdoch, a grasp of moral concepts that did not extend beyond a genetic analysis would be fundamentally flawed, at least in mature moral agents:

Is ‘love’ a mental concept, and if so can it be analysed genetically? No doubt Mary’s little lamb loved Mary, that is it followed her to school; and in some sense of ‘learn’ we might well learn the concept, the word, in that context. But with such a concept that is not the end of the matter. (Nor indeed the beginning either.) Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place. There are two senses of ‘knowing what a word means’, one connected with ordinary language and the other very much less so. Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network. Moreover, if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think. We do not simply, through being rational and knowing

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ordinary language, 'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit, and not back towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language. (Murdoch 1970/2014: 28)

Murdoch here distinguishes between two kinds of 'knowing the meaning of a word'. The first is knowing the public meaning of a word: knowing its extension and the appropriate contexts in which to use it. This is the sense of 'knowing the meaning of a word' that is offered by genetic analysis, and which is well suited to the claim that moral concepts and reasons are universalizable.^x

The second sense of knowing the meaning of a word is the sense in which one might have a deep grasp of it. It is this kind of meaning, Murdoch suggests, that is resistant to the model of universality. Instead, this kind of grasp can be somehow private, a knowing that *contrasts* with 'switching on to some given impersonal network'. It is this second sense of knowing the meaning of a word for which an individual's history may be important and relevant. Despite having learned moral words in a public context, Murdoch emphasises the idea that our knowledge of them is not static but develops over time as our grasp of the full significance of the concepts deepens (at least, in the good case). This deepening can go far beyond a grasp of the public context of the word. This opens up the possibility that different people's moral concepts, in this deep sense, may no longer truly be the same concepts, and may even develop in inconsistent directions, since individual histories can be importantly different.

We can see how each of our histories may become relevant to privacy by reference to Murdoch's example here. The concept of love is plausibly learnt in a public context, by reference to concrete public behaviours (Mary's lamb following her to school, and so on). But the further contexts in which we experience and grapple with love and its demands will shape our conception

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of it in ways that extend far beyond that initial context. A parent who has made use of the concept of ‘parental love’ in relation to parenting a teenager, for example, will likely have a very different conception from someone whose grasp of ‘parental love’ has developed primarily through parenting a baby. The concepts that these two individuals share might initially have been learned in the same public context, but they would likely extend and develop in different directions. If their concepts are deeply shaped by their experiences, and those experiences are radically different, the possibility arises that the concepts may radically diverge, to the point at which they look like different concepts altogether.

Murdoch’s thought here is that this deepening and complicating of our moral concepts is desirable, and her claim seems plausible. There are conceptions of love that might be perfectly adequate in teenagers, for example, that would seem misplaced in the middle aged. Moral experience, we tend to think, ought to shape one’s moral understanding, and this will in part be a matter of deepening our concepts (coming to have a proper grasp of what parental love, say, really *is*). It seems intuitive that one central way in which our concepts evolve is by drawing upon our histories and personal experiences. This introduces the possibility of increasing idiosyncrasy in moral concepts as they are shaped by divergent historical circumstances and divergent grasps of those histories.

The above outlines one way in which one can plausibly come to possess private moral concepts: by taking a public concept and developing it in ever more unique directions that are shaped by one’s history. Another strand of Murdoch’s thinking suggests an alternative way of coming to have private moral concepts: through imaginative *metaphorical* use of a word. Contrary to what she takes to be the received view’s emphasis on ‘disinterested scrutiny’, Murdoch stresses the role of the moral imagination in ethical awareness.^{xi} A good moral agent, she thinks, will not only take the right moral action but also make discerning and creative use of the moral imagination in their moral thought and awareness. Exercising such moral imagination can involve not only

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developing one's grasp of an already existing public moral concept, but also forging new metaphors that enable one to discern (or more vividly discern) morally significant features of the world.

In *Vision and Choice in Morality*, Murdoch emphasises the role that 'personal fables' play in our moral thinking (a kind of moral epistemic activity that she opposes to 'universal rules'). These personal fables, as she understands them, are ways of morally making sense of our lives through weaving a narrative permeated with moral significance: "here must be included a man's meditation upon and conception of his own life, with its selective and dramatic emphases and implications of direction" (Murdoch 1970/2014: 44). There will, of course, be certain definite and 'public' or 'universal' fixed points in such a fable, descriptions of events that would be perfectly understood by any linguistically competent hearer ('I walked to the shop'). But a fable need not be limited to such descriptions. Indeed, it would be a poor fable if it was. Instead, fables imbue the events described with some sort of meaning and significance ('implication of direction'), drawing new and creative connections between the parts and casting the whole in a new light. Such fables, she suggests, are narratives by reference to which one might orient one's life. Within such a fable, concepts may take on altogether new (perhaps metaphorical) meanings, and meanings that are shaped by a unique historical situation and one's conception of it. Within such a fable, even common concepts like *friendship*, *marriage*, *loss* might take on a new meaning, one that is importantly shaped by one's life as understood through the imaginative connections drawn in the fable.^{xii}

Mark Hopwood (2017) illustrates what such a personal fable might look like with reference to Gabriel's decision to 'set out westward' at the end of James Joyce's short story *The Dead*:

'The Dead' describes a pivotal moment in Gabriel Conroy's life. Faced with a situation that threatens his entire conception of himself, he constructs a complex web of metaphor to make sense of his predicament: the snow, the west, the dead, etc. This web of metaphor allows him to come to a decision, or at least a resolution, to 'set out on his journey

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westward'. As readers, we are left with a number of questions, not least of which is the following: what exactly does it mean for Gabriel to 'set out on his journey westward?' There are a number of possibilities here: the west is a symbol of Gabriel's Irish heritage, and the journey westward may involve an attempt to rediscover that heritage. Earlier in the evening he had been accused of being a 'West Briton' who had lost a sense of connection with his homeland, and the accusation had clearly stung him. The west is not only connected with history, however: it is also connected with Gretta [Gabriel's wife] and Michael Furey [her admirer in her youth]. Gabriel's journey westward may have something to do with the perceived inadequacy of his love for Gretta, and the desire to form deeper relationships with those around him. It is also possible, of course, that the journey westward involves a combination of these things, all of which are connected in complex ways in Gabriel's mind. (Hopwood 2017: 256-257)

Gabriel's personal fable, however it is best understood, is intricately connected with his evolving moral conception of his life. Within this fable, 'setting out westward' has a meaning that is unique to Gabriel: it depends upon the particulars of his life, his marriage, his feelings about his homeland, and so on. It also depends upon the particular conception of those things that he has, the moral light in which he understands them. No other person faces quite the same situation when understood in this rich sense, so 'setting out westward' need not be a concept that is shared. Indeed, it may not even be a concept that is *shareable*, since it might be intimately tied down to a vision that involves private concepts that are shaped by his particular history and imaginative moral metaphors.

The moral differences between people, for Murdoch, are thus not merely differences in the actions they take, but also differences in their moral visions, and these differences are (at least partly) conceptual. On the received view, such differences arise when there is disagreement about the extension of a term the meaning of which is public and shared by all. According to this model,

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we might agree on the meaning of a concept such a goodness, and our disagreement is located in our identifying different extensions for it. Murdoch, by contrast, holds that moral differences can be deep conceptual differences, suggesting that moral disagreements are often disagreements about concepts (*love, justice, person*). She writes, for example, that when we think about a person's total vision of life:

[A] moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of Gestalt. We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds. (Murdoch 1970/2014: 39-40)

Her point here seems to be that moral concepts are not best understood as public and universal concepts that are applied to a public, objective, non-moral reality. Rather, our concepts are themselves in contention, and themselves determine the shape of the reality that we perceive.

4. Privacy and Testimony

It is this use of personal and idiosyncratic histories in the development of our concepts that raises problems for moral communication. In section two I noted that successful communication requires shared concepts. But if our moral concepts can be shaped by idiosyncratic personal histories and private imaginative metaphors, they may evolve in distinct and inconsistent ways. The person whose conception of parental love is framed by reference to parenting a teenager may simply have a different conception of it to the parent of a baby, for example, and even within those categories there will be (infinite) scope for conceptual disagreement depending on the particulars of each situation.^{xiii}

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This poses a problem for the possibility of pure moral testimony. As I began by discussing, pure moral testimony requires a shared set of concepts in order for the hearer to gain knowledge from the testifier. But Murdoch's understanding of moral concepts suggests that there is no guarantee that moral concepts will be shared. The person who possesses only the 'public' conception of love may not share a concept with the person whose conception of love has been deeply shaped by their own idiosyncratic experiences of it. And there is no guarantee that those who possess 'deep' concepts that are shaped by their experiences will share concepts, either. The 'deepening and complicating' process which our concepts undergo may take us in different directions, toward ever more private concepts. And this suggests that not all knowledge can be conveyed by pure moral testimony, for not all concepts per se *are* public and shared, and there is no guarantee that the relevant moral concepts can be shared either.^{xiv}

That moral beliefs often involve private concepts does not necessarily preclude their being conveyed via *any* kind of testimony. Whilst it does seem to rule out such knowledge being gained via pure moral testimony, some knowledge might nonetheless be attained via more complex forms of testimonial interaction. Such forms of testimonial interaction might look less like testimony, and more like joint imaginative exploration of a subject, involving joint attention to a situation and conversation in which new ways of thinking about it are sought. The above-mentioned examples (*Wedding* and *Trip*) offered by Sliwa plausibly involve this more complex kind of joint activity. This kind of conversation might allow for the coining of shared private moral concepts, concepts shared between the participants.

Nonetheless, Murdoch's insistence on the privacy of (some) moral concepts does suggest that there is no guarantee that *all* concepts (and thus all knowledge involving those concepts) will be able to be fully shared. Whilst the kind of conversation outlined above might allow for some shared non-public moral concepts, other concepts may remain significantly private to a given individual. Some sufficiently rich and creative moral concepts may to a significant extent be

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incomprehensible to others, epistemically inaccessible to anyone not situated in exactly their position. As Murdoch puts it, “it is surely true that we cannot always understand other people's moral concepts” (Murdoch 1956: 41). Whilst some testimonial exchange that extends beyond public concepts may be possible, other knowledge may nonetheless be resistant to our inquiries, remaining resolutely private and inaccessible except to the thinker.

This, then, seems like a significant limit on the scope of moral testimony. It suggests that insofar as moral concepts are historically situated, deepening and complicating over time, they may also become private and thus significantly incommunicable to others. The value of moral testimony may thus be limited in that it is unable to convey knowledge involving private concepts, which plausibly form an important part of our moral vocabulary. It may, then, be that a certain amount of moral enquiry and consideration is inescapable, that we *cannot* simply depend on others or defer to them for this. Whilst suggesting that a certain amount of epistemic moral work must be done for ourselves, this need not suggest that it must always be done on our own. Instead, whilst limiting the scope of pure moral testimony, the significance of the personal and particular in the development of moral concepts may point towards a valuable role for moral conversation and shared moral imagination.

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ⁱ This view is most clearly supported by Hopkins (2007). Something along these lines is discussed by McGrath (2009) and in Mogensen (2015), though Mogensen is doubtful about this line of response.

ⁱⁱ See Hills (2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ In a recent paper, Hills describes the distinction as follows:

The narrower and more restricted sense [of ‘testimony’] is transmission (classic learning by testimony): the speaker asserts that *p* and the hearer takes her word: her reason for belief is the speaker’s assertion.

The broader and more capacious sense is propagation, whereby what the speaker says is an epistemic influence on the hearer, but not her reason for belief. (Hills 2019: 2)

In this paper, I will be suggesting that some moral knowledge cannot be testimonially conveyed in the former sense, though this leaves open the possibility that (some of) it could be testimonially conveyed in the latter sense.

^{iv} It is precisely this seeming disanalogy that has motivated some pessimists about testimony to be suspicious of it in the moral case.

^v See Hopwood (2017) and Wiseman (2020) for discussions of Murdoch on privacy and universalisability.

^{vi} Hopwood (2017, p. 250-253) discusses the differences between universality and generality. He notes that a moral principle (or reason) can be highly specific (and thus appease particularists interested in generality), whilst nonetheless remaining universal. This is because it might nonetheless apply to *every* individual in the specified situation.

^{vii} Quite how Murdoch squares this with her commitment to ethical objectivity is an interesting question, but I will set it aside for the purposes of this paper.

^{viii} In the background of this idea is Murdoch’s claim, made most explicit in ‘Thinking and Language’ (1951), that thinking is not reducible to discrete linguistic thoughts: “Language and thought are not co-extensive” (Murdoch 1951: 28). She instead insists that some thought can be inchoate and can precede the coining of adequate linguistic expressions. This must be the case if it is possible for people to use the same words and yet refer to different private concepts.

^{ix} I am roughly understanding ‘mature moral agents’ as adults with standard cognitive capacities, i.e., those we standardly hold fully morally accountable and so on.

^x Murdoch here talks about moral *words* rather than moral *concepts*, which makes sense given the linguistic focus of her interlocutors. However, she uses the terms interchangeably, as the second sentence of the quoted paragraph makes clear. In what follows, I will talk primarily about moral concepts, as it seems to better capture the possibility of depth.

^{xi} See, for example, the following texts, which all emphasise the significance of moral imagination, and connect it with attention:

I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. (Murdoch 1970/2014: 35-6)

The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are

‘looking’, making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results. (Murdoch 1970/2014: 42)

^{xii} Indeed, within such a fable even commonplace descriptions such as ‘I walked to the shop’ might take on a new meaning or significance as their place within a wider life is revealed, for example as an instance of domestic drudgery or selfless care for one’s family.

^{xiii} Driver writes: “Moral justification is based on individual perception; which at the most precise level of detail cannot be articulated to others. One can privately justify some moral judgments that may not be publicly justified. It’s worth noting here that if this thesis is correct there is a crucial difference between public and private moral justification. Ironically, this is something the Utilitarians were criticized for, since some argued that it may not maximize utility to make public the Utilitarian rationales for various policies. However, for Murdoch, unlike the Utilitarian, the private nature of at least some instances of moral reflection and justification is essential, it is not a matter of secrecy. Even if one wanted to make it public one could not do so” (Driver 2012: 304).

^{xiv} It is possible that some concepts that are not initially held in common could nonetheless come to be (in a similar way that one might come to share the concept *sycamore*). However, what is necessary for my argument is that it does not look plausible that *all* moral concepts can be shared, since sharing some concepts would require shared experiences, which might require being the same person. Moreover, even in the cases where sharing concepts is possible, it seems that coming to share the deep moral concept would require some epistemic work on the part of the hearer. This might take the form of activities such as imaginative projection and creative thought. These kinds of activities do not look compatible with learning by *pure* moral testimony, since they require that the hearer themselves comes to see the world in a new light rather than by simple deference.