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Article

Moral testimony: another defense

Testemunho moral: outra defesa

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ABSTRACT

According to some pessimists, trusting moral testimony is an action in which the agent does not think about moral questions by herself, and thus it is unacceptable. I argue for optimism by giving some reasons to display moral agents are still depending upon their own in many cases of moral testimony. Specifically, I argue that testimony is a form of social cooperation: the division of epistemic labor. My strategy is as follows: First, I give a principle to show when an agent could reasonably trust moral testimony. Specifically, an agent could reasonably accept the testimony, when she can reasonably expect she would make the same or similar judgment with the testifier. Second, I show how moral testimony could work as a form of social cooperation. Given the principle of the same judgment, it is reasonable for the agent to form a moral belief and act with moral testimony. And it provides us higher efficiency in moral knowledge and shows respect for each moral agent. After that, I provide explanations for the problem of moral disagreement and moral understanding with such a principle for moral testimony. Finally, I respond to some possible objections and give some clarifications of my argument.

Keywords: moral testimony, the division of epistemic labor, moral understanding, moral judgment.

RESUMO

Segundo alguns pessimistas, confiar no testemunho moral é uma ação em que o agente não pensa sozinho nas questões morais e, portanto, é inaceitável. Defendo o otimismo apresentando algumas razões para demonstrar que os agentes morais ainda dependem dos seus próprios em muitos casos de testemunho moral. Especificamente, defendo que o testemunho é uma forma de cooperação social: a divisão do trabalho epistêmico. A minha estratégia é a seguinte: primeiro, apresento um princípio para mostrar quando um agente pode razoavelmente confiar no testemunho moral. Especificamente,



um agente poderia razoavelmente aceitar o depoimento, quando pudesse razoavelmente esperar que faria o mesmo julgamento ou um julgamento semelhante com o testemunhador. Em segundo lugar, mostro como o testemunho moral poderia funcionar como uma forma de cooperação social. Dado o princípio do mesmo julgamento, é razoável que o agente forme uma crença moral e aja com testemunho moral. E nos proporciona maior eficiência no conhecimento moral e demonstra respeito por cada agente moral. Depois disso, forneço explicações para o problema do desacordo moral e da compreensão moral com tal princípio para o testemunho moral. Por fim, respondo a algumas possíveis objeções e dou alguns esclarecimentos sobre meu argumento.

Palavras-chave: testemunho moral, divisão do trabalho epistêmico, compreensão moral, julgamento moral.

1 Introduction

Testimony plays an important role in our life, but people do not hold the same attitudes toward testimony in different domains. Usually, accepting one's testimony is not problematic, e.g., an instructor believes that one student in her class fails to do a certain assignment due to a network problem merely because the student says so. However, there exist disputes about the status of moral testimony. Some philosophers believe that moral testimony is problematic.¹ According to them, there is something problematic if you defer to others in the moral domain, i.e., you form or sustain your moral judgment purely by accepting others' moral judgment (trusting moral testimony). These philosophers are called pessimists about moral testimony. Another group of philosophers claims that there is no particular problem with moral testimony.² They are seen as optimists about moral testimony, as they think moral testimony is not any more problematic than non-moral testimony.

It may be helpful to consider a familiar case:³

Vegetarian: Eleanor always eats meat but has recently realized it raises some moral issues. She asks one of her friends about this problem, instead of thinking further about it. Her friend tells her that eating meat is morally wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is always trustworthy and reliable, and thus she believes her friend. As a result, she believes that eating meat is wrong.

According to pessimists, Eleanor's behavior seems misguided. Specifically, pessimists may hold a principle that Paulina Sliwa calls "*No Testimony*: For a mature moral agent, there is something wrong with relying on testimony for one's moral beliefs, even if one knows one's source to be reliable and trustworthy" (Sliwa, 2012, p. 176).

Pessimists may adopt different strategies to reject moral testimony. Some of them hold that the action of deferring itself is problematic. For example, pessimists may think merely trusting moral testimony lacks moral understanding, which is necessary for more moral values or else.⁴ Some hold that testimony leads to false moral beliefs easily, due to some epistemic reasons. For example, we may have no reliable method to identify moral experts and moral expertise.⁵ In short, pessimists think a moral agent ought

¹ For example, see Nickel (2001), Hopkins (2007), Hills (2009), McGrath (2011), Crisp (2014), Howell (2014), and Hazlett (2017). For some empirical research, see Andow (2020).

² For example, see Jones (1999), Sliwa (2012), Groll & Decker (2014), Enoch (2014), Reisner & Van Weelden (2015), Kiener (2017), Wiland (2017), McShane (2018a, 2018b, 2021), Wright (2018), and Borman (2020).

³ This case is modified on Hills (2009, p. 94) and Sliwa (2012, p. 175).

⁴ See Hills (2009, pp. 106-119).

⁵ See McGrath (2009, pp. 332-338).

not to depend upon moral testimony. Alison Hills, claims for example: “[...] once you have reached maturity as an adult and have the ability to think about moral questions by yourself [...] you have strong reasons to do so, indeed that refusing to do so is *unacceptable*” (Hills, 2009, p. 95).

According to pessimists, trusting moral testimony is an action in which the agent does not think about moral questions by herself, and it is unacceptable to do so in the cases of moral testimony if the agent is mature.

In this paper, I argue for optimism by giving some reasons to show that moral agents are still depending upon their own judgments in many cases of the moral testimony. As moral agents are depending upon their own judgments in those cases, I believe that such actions of trusting moral testimony are not only acceptable but sometimes necessary and encouraged. Specifically, I argue that testimony is a form of social cooperation: the division of epistemic labor. When we are dividing epistemic labor, we are not giving up our own ability to think about questions but aiming at better outcomes. If so, moral testimony itself seems not problematic. The division of epistemic labor in moral knowledge is based on a principle I call the Principle of the Same Judgment: an agent could reasonably accept the testimony, when she is able to reasonably expect she would make the same or similar judgment with the testifier. This paper goes as follows. First, I provide some intuitive cases of acceptable testimony in life and then explain the Principle of the Same Judgment in Section 1. Second, I argue that moral testimony could work as a form of social cooperation. Given the Principle of the Same Judgment, it is reasonable for the agent to form moral beliefs and act with moral testimony. It also provides us with higher efficiency in moral knowledge and shows respect for each moral agent. After that, I explain the problem of moral disagreement and moral understanding with such a principle for moral testimony in Section 2. Finally, I respond to some possible objections and give some clarifications in Section 3. As individuals have similar moral epistemic virtues and limited epistemic resources, trusting moral testimony is needed and even necessary for achieving epistemic efficiency.

2 Arguments for the principle of the same judgment

2.1 The principle of the same judgment

We regularly rely on others’ testimony about non-moral problems in our life; so, let me begin with a case of non-moral testimony:

Apartment: Ted is looking for an apartment in a new place for next year and he is to decide between Apartment A and Apartment B. Ted visits both apartments, and they both seem ok; he cannot make a decision and thus he asks his friend Marshall for advice. Marshall says that Apartment A is awful. Ted knows that Marshall always has had similar preferences to his own and has lived in Apartment A for a long time, so Ted believes him and decides to choose Apartment B without further investigations.

I believe that Ted’s choice is defensible and reasonable. Such things happen in our life every day. In our life, we are always in a position with a lack of motivation to think more on our own. In these cases, we turn to others, including our friends, colleagues, and even strangers for help. Nevertheless, it does not mean any testimony is acceptable. I think the reason why Ted’s choice is defensible is that he could expect reasonably that he would have the same judgment on Apartment A if he had also moved into it like Marshall. After all, Marshall is his good friend, and they always have similar opinions in life. In this case, he may see Marshall as a special kind of his epistemic peer—a “mirror” of sorts—one with whom he could reasonably expect the same judgments. Accordingly, consider the following principle for non-moral testimony:

Principle of the Same Judgment: if a mature agent could reasonably expect that she would make the same or similar judgment with the testifier, it would be rational and right for her to accept the testimony without reflecting more about it on her own, other things being equal.⁶

The key move in this principle is that the testifier *could* obtain some common basic virtues, views, or methods of thinking, which makes the testifier able to draw the same or similar conclusion as the agent. It may be helpful to see this kind of testimony as a method to “borrow” or “share” others’ process of thinking to gain a belief, which the agent could also get if she thinks further without others. In this sense, when a testimony satisfies the Principle of the Same Judgment, it seems rational and right to accept it, as the agent still seems to depend upon herself. After all, the criterion of accepting testimony is based on the agent herself in the cases of the Principle of the Same Judgment.

To clarify, the Principle of the Same Judgment is different from the definition of an epistemic peer.⁷ In the cases of the epistemic peer, two agents must have similar moral views and epistemic positions, and thus may have similar judgments. But it is not necessary for the Principle of the Same Judgment. For example, in the case of Apartment, Marshall does not necessarily need to have the same opinions as Ted, as long as he cares about Ted and knows Ted’s preferences. Perhaps Marshall knows that Ted prefers quietness, and thus he thinks Apartment A with a bar nearby is awful. If so, it is still reasonable for Ted to accept Marshall’s testimony, even if they have different opinions about apartments. In this case, Marshall is not a so-called epistemic peer for Ted, but it still satisfies the requirements of the Principle of the Same Judgment.

I believe the same principle applies to moral cases. Before that, however, it may be necessary to admit three restrictions before moving on. First, I do not mean that in every case of moral testimony the agent ought to believe the testimony. In other words, there exist many cases of unacceptable testimony. In those cases, some other elements may affect the trustworthiness and thus violate the Principle of the Same Judgment.⁸ Second, even when it is reasonable to believe the testimony (i.e., when the case fulfills the Principle of the Same Judgment), the testimony could not guarantee the truth of the judgment. That is to say, the testifier may be wrong herself. Third, the judgment the testifier makes must satisfy certain requirements, i.e., it must be at least reasonable for the testifier oneself to hold the belief. It does not mean that the judgment must be true. However, the testifier must have some good reasons to hold the beliefs, and the beliefs must be stable to some extent.⁹ This requirement is in no way special, as even one forms a moral judgment on one’s own, we may have reason to doubt the reasonableness if he or she just randomly choose one belief. These three restrictions, I believe, apply to non-moral cases as well, as we may come across mistaken testimony and credulity in non-moral cases too. Besides, it is also simpler to focus on the cases of pure moral deference in this paper. After all, pessimists about moral testimony do not deny that we need non-moral testimony.¹⁰ If we are ignorant of non-moral facts, even pessimists about moral testimony agree that it is right to defer to others. So, in this paper, I focus on the cases where the agent does have enough non-moral evidence but still does not think further on her own.

To see a case of acceptable moral testimony, consider such a case:

Property: Barney does not know whether it is wrong to download movies for free but recently has realized that there are some moral issues with this problem. Instead of thinking

⁶ The understanding of “accepting the testimony” is intuitive. It could include forming a new belief that the agent did not hold before, giving up an old belief that the agent held before, choosing one belief among different ones, increasing or reducing credence in a particular belief, acting on the testimony, etc.

⁷ For the discussions on epistemic peers, see Kelly (2005), Elga (2007), Davia & Palmira (2015), and Rowland (2017).

⁸ To be clear, when I say “trustworthiness,” what I mean is merely what is stated in the Principle of the Same Judgment, i.e., it is reasonably expected that the agent would make the same or similar judgment with the testifier.

⁹ As one’s judgment might change from time to time, we can see one as holding a judgment reasonably perhaps only when one’s judgment is stable to some extent and supported by some reasons. After all, it seems less permissible to defer to the testifier when the testifier cannot hold a stable judgment.

¹⁰ For example, see McGrath (2009, p. 322).

further about this, he talks to his friend Lily who tells him that it is morally wrong to download movies for free. Barney knows that Lily has thought deeply about this problem, and they always share common moral views. As a result, Barney believes her and decides not to do that anymore.

In this case, again, it seems reasonable for Barney to adopt the moral testimony provided by Lily, even without further reflections on his own. There are two reasons to support his choice. First, there are good reasons to think that Lily would probably have the same judgment as him. That is to say, it is reasonably expected that they would have the same judgment on the same issue. Second, Lily forms her own moral judgment by reflecting on her own, based on pieces of evidence that are shared by both of them. I believe pessimists would accept Lily's moral belief, as it is the product of her own moral reasoning. In this case, it is reasonably expected for Barney to have the same belief, as long as he thinks further on his own as well. If so, it seems reasonable to accept such a belief into his system of beliefs and act according to it.

Pessimists may think that such a principle leads to some bad consequences. For example, if a bad man has the same moral view as another bad man, it seems rational and *right* for him to accept the other's false judgment as well, but that must be wrong. Nevertheless, this objection is misleading. First, if the bad man does not accept moral testimony but chooses to do bad actions depending upon his own judgment after reflection, it seems not right either.¹¹ The bad man is especially in need of moral testimony in this case. Second, the Principle of the Same Judgment does not provide a sufficient condition for acceptable testimony. To some extent, such bad persons or immature agents who lack moral agency need moral education, which, I believe, is approved by pessimists.

2.2 Other features of the principle of the same judgment

After describing the Principle of the Same Judgment, I explore some other features of this principle and show how this principle can work as a form of the social division of epistemic labor as follows.

First, there are some epistemic reasons to accept the Principle of the Same Judgment. In some cases where the agent trusts the testimony, she can get the belief or judgment by herself, as long as she thinks further. That is because other beliefs in the systems of her own beliefs may imply the result if she does reason on her own.¹² The testifier only provides the implications of her own beliefs by reasoning. For example, if Barney reflects on the possible outcomes of downloading movies for free, he may realize the owner of those movies does not give permission for that and no one could make a profit by making movies if everyone stops going to the cinema, which he has already known. What he has not done is to construct an (inferential) relation between those possible wrong facts and the action of downloading movies. Lily does this for him and thus he gains a moral belief, which is implied by what he already believes. In other cases, the moral belief in question may not be the direct implication of the agent's systems of beliefs, but it is still supported by one's other beliefs. In short, the testimony which satisfies the Principle of the Same Judgment is so coherent with the agent's beliefs that it is rational for the agent to see it as an appropriate part of her system of beliefs. This fact shows that the agent's own thought does play a crucial role in cases of moral testimony. Besides, it also makes it possible to cooperate socially with others in life.

¹¹ Of course, there will be differences between adopting moral testimony and not adopting it. For example, intuitively we may say both the bad man who takes the morally bad action and the bad man who provides the testimony are morally responsible for the action if the former adopts the testimony. On the contrary, if the bad man takes the bad action merely depending upon his own thought, it seems we have no reason to condemn the testifier, as the testifier plays no causal role in leading to the bad action (if we do not include the badness of telling the bad testimony here).

¹² It is unnecessary to assume one is fully rational or has fully consistent system of beliefs. But we could see our systems of beliefs as a web of beliefs, in which different beliefs are linked to each other. For example, see Quine (1951).

After that, it may be important to realize that moral norms are social norms, or norms for society, at least to some extent. In other words, we are handling social relationships within moral rules. Some theorists may hold that morality is constructed based on socialization or something similar. Even those theorists who think moral facts are independent of us may admit moral facts are about social life or discovered by the social power instead of the individuals.¹³ Furthermore, we usually see individuals as equal moral agents when we are considering moral questions.¹⁴ If so, it is natural to see everyone as equal moral agents who share common moral agency and epistemic virtues in life. If we do not see an individual as an equal moral agent, it may seem like a kind of disrespect.¹⁵ In this sense, it may be seen as oversensitive if we do not trust others' moral testimony in some cases. For example, when Barney is downloading movies for free, if Lily tells him that it is morally wrong, but Barney says, "Okay, but I can't trust you because I must reflect on it on my own," it seems what Barney does is a little oversensitive and does not show respect for Lily.¹⁶ I believe it is similar in the cases of non-moral testimony. For example, if you and your friend want to go to a restaurant, and you say that you have checked the map and the restaurant is on Main Street, but your friend says, "Okay, but I can't trust you because I must check it on my own," it seems that your friend does not show respect for you.¹⁷ If we do see other agents as equals, it seems that we have reasons about respecting and recognition to accept others' testimony if it satisfies the Principle of the Same Judgment. After all, the agent may get the same judgment if she thinks further, which is not obviously righter than the testifiers.

Given equal moral agency and epistemic virtues, it may be better for us to see the discovery or construction of moral knowledge as a form of social cooperation, or specifically, a division of epistemic labor. It is not hard to understand the social division of labor in economics. With the division of labor, workers could develop efficiency, because they could focus on smaller and simpler parts in the process of production. The division of epistemic labor is developing as well, with the development of human knowledge and the division of disciplines. Even in the same area, more and more scholars are doing research as a group and relying on mutual support from the academic community.¹⁸ With the division of labor, we save time, energy, and resources, and work more efficiently in a certain area. I believe such a division of epistemic labor applies to moral cases as well. Have we really reflected on those well-informed moral rules including prohibitions of cheating, stealing, or lying on our own (if we are not reading philosophy)? I doubt whether anyone has attempted to reflect on every ordinary moral norm on her own, as the moral domain is such a broad domain that it is nearly impossible for an individual to explore by herself. As pessimists usually think it is better to gain moral beliefs on one's own, it implies that they do not hold a form of moral skepticism or deny the existence of moral knowledge. If so, moral knowledge could only exist as a product of social cooperation. I believe we are also dividing epistemic labor in moral cases, as we not only save time, energy, and epistemic resources in this way but gain more moral knowledge as well. With more moral knowledge, we also do better in moral actions. For example, if we attempt to cook a meal, and a friend tells us to add a spoon of sugar to make it tastes better, it seems good to accept that even without thinking more about what sugar changes. When Barney is down-

¹³ For example, see Miller (2003, pp. 195-203), Railton (1986). I do not presuppose the social contract theory or any other specific metaethical position. Instead, I hope that my proposal is compatible with different metaethical theories in this paper.

¹⁴ This could be called the notion of "basic equality", which is usually one of the key premises in ethical discussions and social life. See Kateb (2014), Waldron (2017), and Rosen (2018).

¹⁵ And it may show certain social virtues in trusting others. For example, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2015).

¹⁶ For a similar concern, see McShane (2018). Moral pessimists may think the insertion of "I can't trust you" is problematic because the point here is that moral testimony itself rather than the testifier is unreliable. But this is the implication of "No Testimony" held by moral pessimists, as they believe it is wrong to rely on the moral testimony provided by people who are trustworthy, which means it is wrong to trust trustworthy people in these cases.

¹⁷ The disrespect is not only about the expression. If you do not express distrust to your friend directly but check the map in private because you do not accept your friend's testimony, your action is still a kind of distrust and disrespect.

¹⁸ Even in the area of philosophy where people are used to working individually, co-authorship is becoming popular and encouraged. For example, see West & Moravec (2021).

loading movies for free online and Lily tells him not to do that in order not to be blamed, it seems also acceptable even without thinking more about it. With the Principle of the Same Judgment, we trust the moral reasonings of each other and thus hold more moral beliefs than what we have reflected on.¹⁹ And it also makes it possible to construct our moral views, with those interconnected moral beliefs.

3 Moral disagreement and moral understanding

In this section, I consider two problems about moral testimony—moral disagreement and moral understanding in the scheme of the Principle of the Same Judgment and argue that they do not support the thesis of “*No Testimony*.”

As someone may point out, if there are some peer disagreements in which epistemic peers could also reasonably hold moral disagreements, it seems to weaken the reliability of the Principle of the Same Judgment. I argue moral disagreement is not a problem for the Principle of the Same Judgment. As we accept both the existence of non-moral disagreements and the reliability of non-moral testimony in life, it may be better to focus on pure moral disagreements. There are two kinds of pure moral disagreements to consider here.

The former results from some different basic values. For example, in the case of Property, another friend of Lily, Robin, may especially attach importance to the collective ownership and the value of sharing, and thus chooses to download free movies online, even though she also has similar epistemic virtues to Lily. In this case, Lily may not share common starting points with such persons and thus she could not reasonably expect to have the same judgment as Robin. In short, it does not satisfy the Principle of the Same Judgment. In sum, if two persons have different starting points or basic values, they may not see each other as a reliable testifier on the issue in question, even though they may be seen as epistemic peers according to some loose standards.

The other one is more complex. Two persons may share common basic values and epistemic virtues at first. Nevertheless, with different processes of reasoning or experience, they may have different judgments as well. In the case of Property, if Barney does think further about the issue on his own and his investigation puts stress on the poor men with needs in cultural products who cannot afford those, while Lily puts stress on the cost and the ownership of making movies, they may draw different conclusions, given similar information. I believe it is understandable. But it does not mean Barney should defer to Lily. Because this case does not satisfy the Principle of the Same Judgment, either. After all, Barney does reflect totally on his own in this case, instead of relying on Lily’s reasoning. It is a form of peer disagreement, which I believe happens in non-moral cases as well. There may be another similar case, however, which satisfies the Principle of the Same Judgment. Imagine that Barney has two good friends Lily and Robin, who reason on their own separately in this case but have different judgments. Each moral judgment satisfies the requirements of the Principle of the Same Judgment. If so, it seems acceptable to defer to anyone of them for Barney. I agree that the existence of disagreements between testifiers may provide more reason to think further on one’s own, but it still seems not unacceptable to trust the testimony. Besides, I do not plan to discuss what to do with such disagreement in this paper.²⁰ It may be necessary to point out that it is similar in non-moral cases as well. For example, if you and your friends want to go to a restaurant, and both of them have checked the map, but one says the restaurant is on Main Street and the other says it is on Second Street, it seems you have more reason to check by yourself now, but it is still not wrong to refuse to do it (and maybe just wait for them to discuss it).

¹⁹ Although the Principle of the Same Judgment plays a crucial role in the division of epistemic labor, it is independently established, as we see above. That is, the principle could work in a single case.

²⁰ There are some discussions about whether it is reasonable to defer to peer disagreements. See Kelly (2005), Elga (2007), and Rowland (2017).

Another important objection to moral testimony is that we cannot get moral understanding without thinking on our own. Hills, argues for example: “[...] it is essential to virtue and to an important kind of morally worthy action that you base your moral beliefs on your moral understanding” (Hills, 2009, p. 119). And:

Where optimists go wrong is in their assumption that all that we are or should be interested in is moral knowledge. [...] we should be trying to gain moral understanding, in which case pessimists are right—at least in circumstances where moral understanding is available—that you have good reasons not simply to trust moral testimony. (Hills, 2009, pp. 125-126).

According to Hills, we need to get moral understanding to be virtuous agents and do morally worthy actions. Moral understanding is seen as the ability to give and follow explanations and articulate reasons for an action’s moral valence.²¹ I agree with Sliwa, however, who argues that testimony may sometimes be necessary to achieve moral understanding. According to Sliwa, even in the cases where we may not gain moral understanding from moral testimony, moral testimony is still a means of resolving moral uncertainty.²² Even if an action based on moral testimony is not maximally morally worthy, this does not show that the obstacle to moral worth is moral testimony. After all, it may even not be one of the agent’s options given her moral ignorance. Besides, it seems what matters is that we do the right thing, instead of whether our action deserves maximum moral credit.

When we see moral testimony as an important form of the social division of epistemic labor, it gives us more possibilities to explain moral understanding.²³ As a social community, we may share moral understandings to some extent.²⁴ For example, some of us may think more about the property, while others may reflect more on equality. We all decide to stop downloading movies for free and donate more to the poor. In this case, we do have moral understandings as a group, even though not everyone has reflected on everything about moral issues in life. In this case, it seems we are still depending upon ourselves, as our beliefs support the testimony, according to the Principle of the Same Judgment. With this principle, we share moral understanding and act for the right reasons. When we get a new product and follow instructions provided by others, we are sharing the understanding provided by others to make it work. Similarly, when we are facing a moral issue and follow moral instructions provided by others, we are sharing moral understandings provided by others to act morally. In this sense, we are still attempting to do a morally worthy action for moral reasons as virtuous people. The only difference is that we shift the process of reasoning on each other in a framework of social cooperation, with the Principle of the Same Judgment. It may be like a foundation in which every agent has their own shares. Every individual is permitted to use it to help to reason on moral issues and there is no need to think that we are merely depending upon others, even though social cooperation is necessary.

Moral understanding is important and even better than mere testimony on a single moral issue. After all, it makes us able to make more moral judgments independently. Nevertheless, when discussing the status of moral testimony, we focus on whether moral testimony is acceptable, or whether refusing to think on one’s own is acceptable. It seems unclear whether the analysis of moral understanding could provide a compelling reason to reject moral testimony if we accept the status of moral testimony in a social division of epistemic labor, as it does provide the shared moral understanding and may be more efficient in the practical sense.

²¹ Hills (2009, pp. 102-103). Also see Hills (2015, 2020) and Callahan (2018). For some worries, see Kiener (2017) and Croce (2020).

²² Sliwa (2012, pp. 191-194; 2016).

²³ For general objections to the view that testimony cannot provide understanding, see Boyd (2017), Mogensen (2017), and Malfatti (2020, 2021).

²⁴ Wiland (2018) argues we could see a moral advisor and an advisee as joint agents and thus share more worth. Although Wiland only focuses on moral advice, his account has some similarities with mine about moral testimony here.

4 Possible objections and responses

In this section, I consider some possible objections and give some clarifications of my arguments.

First, perhaps some may misread the Principle of the Same Judgment and think I am only repeating another concept of epistemic superiority. Nevertheless, that is not what I mean. I believe even pessimists accept that it is not wrong to trust the moral testimony of epistemic superiors. The reason is that the epistemic superior is in a better epistemic position and therefore may have more non-moral evidence and knowledge. If so, it is a case of impure moral testimony, which may be accepted by pessimists. Differently, the Principle of the Same Judgment is focused on the cases of pure moral testimony. And the key move in the principle is that the agent does not reason by herself but chooses to trust others' result of reasoning, which is based on the common virtues and views between the agent and the testifier. So, there is no need to see the testifier as an epistemic superior, which is more obvious if we understand moral testimony in the scheme of social cooperation.

A similar response applies to the problem of moral experts as well. In this paper, I do not intend to define moral experts or provide a method to recognize moral experts. I believe that moral experts are people who have more mature skills of reasoning and analysis or own more non-moral knowledge, which is crucial in moral judgments but irrelevant to this paper. Pessimists may also need to do some work in defining moral expertise if they accept that agents could and need to gain moral knowledge on their own. What I argue is that agents are still depending upon their own in many cases of moral testimony, which satisfies the Principle of the Same Judgment. If so, there is no reason to reject moral testimony based on the thought that they are not the products of one's own reasoning.

It may remain unclear how to know whether we could reasonably expect the same judgments with the testifier, or how to know whether a testimony satisfies the requirements of the Principle of the Same Judgment. Above all, as I state above, usually we see individuals as equal moral agents when we are considering moral questions. If so, it is natural to see everyone as equal moral agents who share common moral agency and epistemic virtues in life. Because of it, it is acceptable to think that every moral agent is reliable on some basic and uncontroversial moral issues. For example, we may not doubt an ordinary person would see lying as morally wrong—although it may not be significant for the discussion on moral testimony, this conclusion is implied by the Principle of the Same Judgment. The agents such as our friends or colleagues may share more common moral views and epistemic virtues with us. And because of that, it is reasonable to expect that we would have the same moral judgments as them. I admit that there is no clear and definite standard for this principle—it largely depends on how we identify the moral values and epistemic virtues in constructing moral beliefs, but I believe it is understandable, as our moral values and epistemic virtues are not easily classified, which applies to non-moral cases as well.

Another clarification is that I am not holding that it is discouraged to think on one's own given social cooperation, even though it is encouraged to trust moral testimony.²⁵ To cooperate in the epistemic labor is unavoidable and better, but it is still important and necessary to think on one's own. After all, social cooperation depends on each agent's work. If an agent decides to depend on others totally, without thinking about anything about moral issues, and thus only follows others' moral actions, it may be seen as a behavior of free-riding in the social cooperation of epistemic labor. Given the fact of social cooperation, free-riders are even more discouraged by the optimists about moral testimony. On the other hand, the action of free-riding may not satisfy the requirements of the Principle of the Same Judgment, either. If an agent could see another as a reliable testifier, she must show their moral values, epistemic virtues, and the method of reasoning are similar, which is impossible if the agent totally depends on others.

²⁵ After all, I do not deny that merely relying on testimony has some weaknesses. Also see Hlobil (2020).

5 Conclusion

According to some pessimists, moral testimony is problematic, as the agents are depending upon others and do not have moral understanding when relying on moral testimony. For example, Hills argues:

If you want to be properly oriented to moral reasons, you have excellent instrumental reasons not to defer to experts or to put your trust in moral testimony. But these are practical reasons [...] these are unusual practical reasons, because they are based on a goal—moral understanding—which is (arguably) epistemically valuable. (Hills, 2009, p. 126).

In this paper, however, I argue it is better to see moral testimony as an important form of social cooperation—a social division of epistemic labor in moral knowledge. In this sense, there are strong practical reasons to accept moral testimony and see moral understanding as shared. I provide some reasons to display moral agents are still depending upon their own in many cases of moral testimony. My arguments are focused on the Principle of the Same Judgment: if a mature agent could reasonably expect that she would make the same or similar judgment with the testifier, it would be rational and right for her to accept the testimony without reflecting more about it on her own, other things being equal. Moral testimony, I believe, is also defensible for the same reason. Although there are some problematic cases of moral testimony, they may be products of disobeying such a principle or even turning to the wrong testifiers. If my arguments work, at least some cases of moral testimony are defensible, and sometimes necessary and encouraged.

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