Moral Expertise and Moral Understanding: A Non-Cognitivist Account

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the interplay between moral expertise and moral understanding. Specifically, by focusing on moral understanding rather than on moral knowledge, whether there is a way to rethink moral expertise without embracing moral realism will be assessed. The main theoretical gain is that an understanding-based account of moral expertise can explain why moral testimony is suspicious, while the standard account cannot. In this respect, for an understanding-based account of moral expertise to really count as an alternative to realist and knowledge-based ones, some points have to be argued for: first, understanding, unlike knowledge, cannot be transmitted by testimony; second, understanding, unlike knowledge, needs to be characterized as non-factive. Both claims will be supported by referring to a sentimentalist account of moral understanding, according to which moral understanding is at least partially non-cognitive. Such an understanding-based account of moral expertise constitutes the starting point to radically rethink the notion of moral expertise and other related issues, such as moral testimony and the question regarding who are, if any, the moral experts.

Keywords: Moral expertise, Moral testimony, Moral understanding, Moral deference, Moral knowledge.

1. Introduction

Experts in any domain are those who possess an unusually extensive amount of knowledge relevant to that domain and the ability to apply that knowledge to action. According to the standard account of expertise, S is an expert about domain D if S has more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs in propositions pertaining to D than do most people (Goldman 2016). Along this line of thought, as for the moral domain, we can say that S is a moral expert if S has more true moral beliefs and fewer false moral beliefs than do most people. Such a conception of moral

expertise is generally based on a realist conception of moral knowledge.[1] Moral realism is the view according to which there is a domain of moral facts which are mind-independent and knowable by us; thus, moral beliefs are true insofar as they accurately depict those facts (Shafer-Landau 2003). That being so, if there is a domain of moral facts, then "it is natural to expect that some of us—intuitively, the "moral experts"—would be better placed to discover these facts than others" (McGrath 2011: 117). Indeed, moral experts are those who know those moral facts better than others, i.e., those who have more true moral beliefs than others. Contrary to this expectation, while it is widely agreed that there are experts in many fields (e.g., science, arts, religion, plumbing, etc.), whether there are moral experts is a controversial matter.

In general terms, that there can be experts in a given domain is strongly related to the issue of testimony. In this respect, "the most succinct way to capture the notion of expertise is to say that experts are those whose testimony in their respective areas of expertise ought to be trusted" (Cholbi 2018: 74). The testimony of the expert is of a particular kind in so far as the testimony of the expert has some epistemic authority that the testimony of the non-expert has not.[2] In other words, the testimony of the expert should be accepted. However, in the moral domain the testimony of the alleged expert is a far more complex issue. It has been argued that there cannot be any moral testimony because moral beliefs cannot be transmitted by testimony.[3] Given that moral experts are defined as people whose moral testimony should be accepted, the thesis that moral beliefs cannot be transmitted by testimony seems thus to cast some doubts on the very existence of moral experts.

In the recent literature on moral testimony, there can be found two most influential arguments through which it has been maintained that moral beliefs cannot be transmitted by testimony. The first argument appeals to the notion of moral understanding.[4] According to that argument, having understanding of a moral proposition is in tension with acquiring those moral beliefs via testimony (cf. § 5). The second argument refers to the metaethical aspects of the issue.[5] According to

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[1] It has to be noted that there are many conceptions of moral truth and moral knowledge, some of which are not realist, as, for instance, constructivist or pragmatist views on truth and knowledge. However, the argument presented in the paper addresses specifically realist conceptions of moral knowledge and moral expertise.

[2] As John Hardwig writes, "[a]ppeals to the authority of experts often provide justification for claims to know, as well as grounding rational belief. At the same time, [...] the epistemic superiority of the expert to the layman implies rational authority over the layman" (Hardwig 1985: 336). On the idea of "epistemic authority", see also Jäger 2016, Constantin, Grundmann 2020.

[3] Whether there can be moral testimony is a hotly debated topic (see e.g., Agich, Spielman 1997; Bina, Bonicalzi, Croce 2024; Driver 2013; Singer 1972). Robert Hopkins (2007) introduced an influential distinction between "pessimists" and "optimists" on moral testimony. While the former believe that there is something problematic in morally deferring to other people (Nickel 2001; Hopkins 2007; Howell 2014; Crisp 2014), the latter maintain that in so far as testimony in general is not problematic, even moral testimony is not (Jones 1999; Sliwa 2012; Enoch 2014; Groll, Decker 2014). I will not enter the details of that debate, but the argument discussed here endorses a pessimist view on moral testimony.

[4] For versions of this argument, see e.g., Hills 2009, Hopkins 2007, Nickel 2001, Callahan 2018, Viswanathan 2021.

[5] For a metaethical investigation into moral expertise and moral testimony, see especially McGrath 2008, 2009, 2011, McConnell 1984.

that argument, the problems raised by moral testimony undermine the realist conception of moral expertise (cf. § 3). On the contrary, other metaethical views, such as non-cognitivism, are not only compatible with the problems raised by moral testimony but can also provide an explanation for its difficulties. So far, the relation between those two arguments has not been adequately explored. This paper combines the two arguments by focusing on the metaethical discussion of moral expertise. An adequate metaethical view on moral expertise, we argue, can account for the problems of moral testimony. More precisely, a non-cognitivist approach to moral expertise will be proposed and a sentimentalist account of moral understanding developed.[6] More specifically, by focusing on moral understanding rather than on moral knowledge, whether it is possible to rethink moral expertise without embracing moral realism is assessed. On this alternative view, moral expertise is characterized in terms of more moral understanding rather than accumulation of moral knowledge.

2. Moral Testimony and Moral Realism

In our everyday life, we often discuss with other people on moral matters or ask our friends for advice on how to behave in a given circumstance. We also look for a non-moral expert opinion to make a moral decision (e.g., we ask a physicist for the environmental risks of a nuclear power plant before voting on the abolition of nuclear power plants). All these cases can be understood as "moral testimony" in a wide sense and there seems to be nothing problematic with them. However, in the philosophical debate on moral expertise, moral testimony is understood in a narrower sense. In this literature moral testimony is defined in the following way: "Let a speaker (S) assert a proposition (*p*) to a hearer (H). This will be a case of moral testimony iff: (i) H *defers* to S on the matter whether p, and (ii) p has *strong moral content*" (Callahan 2020: 124). Thus, in order for a case of testimony to count as moral testimony, it needs to imply deference with respect to a moral judgment. For instance, I believe that helping those in need is morally right because someone told me that it is the case, and I defer to her.

There can be cases in which H comes to believe that p *because* S told her that p, but H is not deferring to S. To clarify this point, it can be helpful to compare testimony with what Alan Gibbard (1990) defined "Socratic Influence". In that case, a speaker's statements and suggestions lead a hearer to draw on her own similar conclusions to the speaker's own. The point is that instances of Socratic Influence are generally regarded as cases of "moral advice" rather than moral testimony. In other words, there is testimony when someone defers to another person, i.e., when someone holds a belief *solely* because another person holds that belief.[7] For instance, "if I believe, solely on the basis your testimony, that we should turn left rather than right at the next light in order to reach our destination, then I defer to you about which way we should turn" (McGrath 2011: 213). Although there are many borderline cases, a minimal definition of testimony on which it is reasonable to think the majority of scholars could converge is the following one: whether an episode can count as accepting testimony "depends upon whether the testimonial reasons make (or would make) a difference as to whether

[6] The thesis that moral understanding is at least a partly non-cognitive process can be found, e.g., in Callahan 2018, Howard 2018, Bailey 2020, Grimm 2016.

[7] That testimony requires deference is an open issue. For a supportive position of such a view on testimony, see Hills 2009; for a critical discussion, see Sliwa 2012.

you believe what you are told" (Wiland 2017: 53). So, considering again the aforementioned example, that case can count as an instance of testimony only if, in the absence of your testimony, I would have turned right at the next light or I would have stopped and remained undecided about where to turn.

In this respect, moral testimony is no different from testimony in general. Whatever investigation into moral testimony needs to take into consideration the epistemological conditions featuring testimony. However, between moral testimony and testimony in general there is a difference that is significant in this context. Consider the following example:

> You are on holiday and someone gives you tickets to a boxing match. En route you bump into a friend who asks your plans for the evening. You tell her that you are headed to the stadium, though you are not sure where it is. She replies: "It's on 21st street." Taking her to be reliable, you defer to her and head for 21st street. Before parting she asks what you're going to see at the stadium. You tell her that you are going to watch boxing. She replies: "It's morally wrong to watch boxing." Taking her to be reliable, you defer to her and head back to your hotel (Fletcher 2016: 45).

While there is nothing suspicious in the first part of the example (I defer to a friend about where the stadium is), there is something extremely problematic in believing that to watch a boxing match is morally wrong solely on the basis of my friend's say-so[8]. This is especially true if two conditions obtain in the example: (1) my friend does not possess relevant non-moral information that I lack (e.g., I do not know exactly what a boxing match consists of or my friend knows some details about how a boxing match works that I lack) and (2) my judgment is not impaired or biased in a way that my friend's is not (e.g., I am too angry or too drunk to think appropriately about boxing match). If those conditions obtain, the example is a case of "pure" moral deference (McGrath 2011): I defer to you as you possess some moral knowledge that I lack. In such a case, I treat you as a moral expert in a strong sense. What has to be noted here is that there is an "asymmetry" between morality and other domains in so far as we seem less likely to defer to a moral expert than to a non-moral (e.g., scientific, religious, aesthetic, etc.) expert. While it is widely accepted that testimony is an important source of knowledge (Lackey, Sosa 2006; Lackey 2008), that there can be moral testimony is a controversial matter (Callahan 2020). So, there seems to be something uniquely amiss with forming moral beliefs by testimony and perhaps we should conclude that moral knowledge cannot be outsourced. This gap between testimony in the moral domain and testimony in other domains is the starting point of whatever investigation into moral testimony. These problems concerning moral testimony make even the concept of moral expertise problematic. Given

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[8] It could be argued that what the boxing match shows is that agents are less likely to defer to someone else's opinion on moral issues, whether or not they are considered experts, like my friend in the example. But the example can be understood in a different way as well. The point of the example is to show that if I defer to my friend's moral judgment about watching a boxing match, I am assuming that she has some moral beliefs that I do not. In this sense, what is relevant here is not whether or not I consider my friend to be a moral expert (and therefore defer to her), but that deferring to her would be to assume that she has more moral knowledge than I do.

that moral experts are those whose testimony should be accepted, if there can be no moral testimony, there can be no moral experts.

It might be argued that what is at stake here is not the conception of moral expertise *tout court* but the realist conception of moral expertise. The problem is that moral realism cannot explain the inconsistency between testimony in the moral domain and testimony in other domains. If one adopts a realist view on morality, indeed, it is hard to explain why moral testimony and moral deference are problematic in a way in which testimony and deference in non-moral domains are not. According to moral realism, there is a domain of moral facts which are mind-independent and knowable by us. If there is such a domain of moral facts, we could admit that there are moral experts, in so far as some of us are more likely to know those facts. If we agree on that, i.e., that there are moral experts and that they have more moral knowledge than the average person, deference to them should not be suspicious. As we ask a geography expert which is the main city of the Fiji Islands, we may ask a moral expert whether eating meat is morally permissible. But moral deference and moral testimony do seem suspicious. According to some authors, moral deference and moral testimony are suspicious precisely because moral realism is false (McGrath 2011; McConnell 1984). In other words, in front of the alleged moral facts supposed by moral realism, moral testimony is problematic because there are no such moral facts to be transmitted. Without endorsing the thesis that moral realism is false because it fails to account for the problems of moral testimony, we will simply maintain that moral realism is not the right perspective to address the issue of moral expertise.

3. Moral Testimony and Non-Realist Accounts of Morality

Contrary to moral realism, non-realist accounts of morality (i.e., those views that deny that there is a domain of independent and knowable moral facts) can explain why moral deference and moral testimony are suspicious. So, within a non-realist metaethical framework we can accommodate our intuitions about moral testimony and moral deference. This is the case, for instance, of non-cognitivism.[9] According to non-cognitivism, when one utters a moral sentence, such as "the death penalty is not permissible", she is not describing something external or saying something that can be true or false. Rather, she is expressing her own emotional reaction or sentiment towards the death penalty. Non-cognitivism comes

[9] Although here non-cognitivism is presented as an alternative view to moral realism, it should be specified that the distinction between realism/non-realism and the distinction between cognitivism/non-cognitivism do not completely overlap. However, although not all of those who support moral cognitivism subscribe to moral realism (consider, for instance, error theorists), almost all of those who support moral realism tend to subscribe to cognitivism. Indeed, non-cognitive approaches to moral epistemology are not attractive for moral realists insofar as those approaches imply charges of moral skepticism (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006). Moreover, not only do moral realists need cognitivism, but they also need that there is a reliable way of gaining moral knowledge. If there is no such a way, realists are in the same position of error theorists: either way, our moral beliefs cannot be said to be true. If one adopts error theory, on one side, there are no moral facts and our moral beliefs are not true because there is nothing they can correspond to; if one adopts moral realism but moral facts cannot be known, on the other side, moral beliefs cannot be said to be true, since they cannot be recognized as true even in the case they happen to be true by chance. In light of these remarks, here I refer to non-cognitivism as an interesting perspective to develop a non-realist position in metaethics.

in many varieties. In uttering the moral judgment, "the death penalty is not permissible", according to emotivism, one is expressing her own negative emotional response towards death penalty (Ayer 1936); according to prescriptivism, one is condemning the death penalty (Hare 1952); according to expressivism, one is projecting outside her own internal attitudes (sentiments, emotions, reactions, etc.) elicited by the death penalty (Blackburn 1984), or expressing her acceptance of norms that prohibit the death penalty (Gibbard 1990). If some version of non-cognitivism is true, then it is unsurprising that moral deference is problematic: if my judging that the death penalty is wrong is, for instance, a matter of expressing my own negative reaction towards it, then there is something certainly odd about the idea of deferring to someone else about whether capital punishment is wrong.

Moreover, that non-cognitivism fares better than moral realism in accounting for the problems concerning moral testimony, can be explained even by referring to the issue of moral knowledge. As Robert Hopkins writes, "[t]estimony is a means for learning from others, for coming to know what they know" (2007: 615). According to non-cognitivism, moral claims cannot be true or false, i.e., they do not constitute moral knowledge. So, if non-cognitivism is correct, then moral knowledge does not exist; therefore, transmission of moral knowledge via testimony is not possible. That there is no knowledge about moral matters to be transmitted explains why moral testimony is problematic. On the contrary, according to moral realism, at least some of our moral beliefs are true and thus constitute moral knowledge; therefore, on a realist perspective on morality, why moral knowledge cannot be transmitted via testimony remains unexplained.

Thus, the advantage of non-cognitivism over moral realism consists in the fact that the former can more readily explain why moral testimony is problematic, while moral realists face greater challenges in doing so. However, this comes at a price. On a non-cognitivist view, indeed, since there are no moral facts to be known and to be transmitted, there cannot be moral testimony and therefore, it seems, we should conclude that moral expertise does not exist. Therefore, we face a dilemma: if we accept moral realism, it provides us with a strong conception of moral expertise, but such a conception cannot explain why deferring to a moral expert is problematic in a way that deferring to a non-moral expert is not. On the contrary, if we accept a non-realist conception of morality, we can account for our intuitions about moral deference and moral testimony, but there is no room for moral expertise within that conception.

4. Moral Expertise and Moral Understanding

The realist conception of moral expertise, we argued, is problematic. Even if we might agree that there are no moral experts in a strong sense, i.e., in the sense claimed by the realist, that there is nothing like moral expertise is a far more radical claim to sustain. On a metaethical point of view, the question is whether we can account for moral expertise without being committed to the realist claim that moral experts are those who possess moral knowledge.

An alternative strategy may consist in arguing that moral expertise can be understood in terms of moral understanding rather than moral knowledge.[10] If so far the notion of understanding has been mainly investigated in epistemology and

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[10] On this, see Severini 2021.

philosophy of science,[11] such a notion is now gaining a burgeoning attention even in moral philosophy.[12]

Now, whether understanding can be considered a different epistemic state from knowledge is an open question. According to the so-called reductionist approach, moral understanding is a pure matter of knowing right from wrong (Sliwa 2017; Riaz 2015). If so, moral understanding cannot constitute an alternative to the concept of moral knowledge, but, as a species of knowledge, it will incur the same difficulties in accounting for moral expertise which the concept of moral knowledge incurs. Here, we will endorse a non-reductionist approach on understanding, according to which understanding is not a species of knowledge. In this regard, some scholars characterized understanding in the moral domain as a species of "understanding why" relative to moral propositions,[13] which needs to be distinguished from moral knowledge. According to the so-called non-reductionist approaches to understanding (Hills 2009; 2016), the mental state of understanding why an action is right and the mental state of knowing why it is right are two different mental states. Thus, moral understanding cannot be reduced to moral knowledge, since an agent can be in the former state without being in the latter. In particular, as Hills argues, "understanding why p [...] differs from both knowledge that p and knowledge why p (as they are standardly understood)". As for the first distinction, it is rather obvious that understanding why p is different from knowing that p. Indeed, we have a strong intuition that, for instance, "understanding why eating meat is wrong" is rather different from "knowing that eating meat is wrong". Understanding why eating meat is wrong involves an appreciation of the reasons that make it wrong that propositional knowledge does not involve. So, as we will show in a moment, it can be the case that someone knows that p without properly understanding p. Moreover, as the second distinction suggests, understanding why p is different even from knowing why p. So, for instance, "understanding why eating meat is wrong" is different from "knowing that eating meat is wrong (p) because of the suffering of animals under modern farming methods (q)". This second case, i.e., the claim that understanding why p is different from knowing why p, needs more attention than the first one. Here, the underlying idea is that understanding why p requires more than the correct belief that p because q. Understanding requires a grasp of the reasons why p, or more precisely, a grasp of the relationship between p and q that knowledge why p does not. To achieve understanding, a subject needs to grasp the relationship between relevant pieces of information about the issue at hand. Thus, understanding why p is different from knowing why p as it involves different layers of uptake and abilities to reason in a more complex manner about p. Whether a subject S understands (or knows) why p depends on how she relates towards q, i.e., the reasons why p. More precisely, according to Allison Hills (2009), when p is why q, understanding why p requires that S can successfully explain why p in S's own words; S can draw the appropriate conclusion that p from the information that q; S can answer "what if things were different" questions (e.g., if S understands why eating meat is wrong, S can also address questions about similar cases: What about eating animals which have been reared under better conditions? What

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[11] See, e.g., Elgin 2007, 2017, Kvanving 2003, de Regt *et al.* 2009.
[12] See, e.g., Hills 2016, Sliwa 2017, Croce 2020.
[13] Here, for illustrative purposes, I follow the characterization of understanding provided by Hills 2016.

about killing animals for other purposes, such as medical experimentation?). In other words, to possess moral understanding, S needs to exhibit a certain set of abilities that amount to exerting a "cognitive control" over *p* (Hills 2016: 663). In this respect, moral understanding is not to be thought of as a kind of practical know how (e.g., knowing how to play the piano or how to make a cake). There can rather be a kind of "intellectual know how" (Hills 2016: 661) (e.g., knowing how to draw conclusions, how to articulate moral explanations into your own words, how to answer "what if things were different" questions, and so on). Understanding why requires precisely this kind of intellectual abilities.

As stated earlier, we will defend a non-reductionist approach on understanding, even though the debate about the distinction between understanding and knowledge is still ongoing. However, for an understanding-based account of moral expertise to count as an alternative to the realist and knowledge-based account, affirming that understanding is different from knowledge is not enough. In this respect, two claims will be argued for: that understanding cannot (easily or at all) be transmitted by testimony (§ 5) and that understanding can be characterized as non-factive (§ 6).[14] This means that we will have to embrace a non-reductionist and non-factivist view on moral understanding. Once clarified these aspects, such a conception of moral understanding can constitute a restart to develop a non-realist notion of moral expertise. On this view, moral experts can be regarded not as those who are able to discover moral facts, as moral realism maintains, but as those who are able to achieve moral understanding.

5. Moral Understanding and Testimony

Let us start our analysis on the transmissibility of moral understanding. A widespread explanation about why moral testimony is problematic refers precisely to the notion of moral understanding. According to that explanation, if there is something wrong with moral testimony, this consists in the fact that acquiring some moral beliefs via testimony could not grant any moral understanding.[15] This point has been clearly summarized by Philip Nickel:

> morality requires more of agents than that they have a correct belief concerning some moral claim. It requires agents to understand the moral claim [...]. However, in many cases all that moral testimony provides is a correct moral belief without understanding (Nickel 2001: 259–260).

Nickel distinguishes precisely between "having a correct moral belief", that would amount to have some moral knowledge, and "understanding a moral claim". Now, if testimony can play a role in acquiring moral knowledge, testimony is not a good way to acquire moral understanding. This marks a difference between knowledge and understanding that is crucially relevant in this context. It is part of the standard conception of knowledge that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony. Although there is a heated debate about how exactly knowledge

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[14] Even though I do not dwell on the debate between reductionists and non-reductionists approaches on understanding, it has to be noted that the two claims that I am going to discuss (§§ 5-6) mark a relevant difference between understanding and knowledge. Indeed, knowledge, as it is generally understood, can be transmitted by testimony and is factive.

[15] This conclusion follows if one holds, as we do, a non-reductionist account of understanding, i.e., if one is convinced that knowledge and understanding are different epistemic states.

can be transmitted, it is widely agreed that it can. After all, much of the knowledge that we have has been attained by deferring to others. In this respect, understanding is different. As McGrath writes, "if I believe that *p* is true solely on the basis of your say-so, I typically do not understand why *p*" (McGrath 2011: 123–124). Thus, testimony can transmit knowledge but not understanding.[16]

Referring to the notion of understanding allows us to explain why moral testimony is problematic and, more precisely, why we tend to think that someone who defers to another person about a moral issue *p*, does not fully understand *p*. For instance, consider the case that Rosa believes that the death penalty is not morally permissible because someone else told her so. In that case, we have a strong intuition that Rosa is not fully convinced that the death penalty is not morally permissible. An explanation for the intuition we have is the following: since moral understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony, if Rosa believes that the death penalty is not morally permissible because someone else told her so, she has not any moral understanding of death penalty; in this case, what Rosa can have, is just the correct belief that the death penalty is not permissible.

The example of Rosa consents us to understand a common argument raised to sustain that understanding is difficult or impossible to transmit via testimony. According to that argument, understanding requires that the subject grasps the relationship between relevant pieces of information about the matter at hand. Zagzebski argues that the kind of "grasping" that seems necessary for understanding cannot be inherited from anyone else, but it is something a person can only do "firsthand" (Zagzebski 2008). Therefore, if one relies on others, as Rosa does, she can know that *p* but cannot understand *p*. For this reason, moral understanding requires the direct involvement of the subject in attempting to express a moral judgment on her own. More precisely, understanding requires not only a direct involvement but also an active role of the subject who tries to understand, insofar as someone who knows *p* needs to merely "assent" some proposition *p*, whilst someone who understands *p* needs to "grasp" this proposition *p*. If, at least in principle, people can acquire moral knowledge by relying on the judgments of others, they can develop the ability to make their own moral judgments and to acquire moral understanding only by trying to think through moral questions on their own.

This epistemic feature of understanding may have some relevant implication in ethics. Indeed, we can suppose that moral understanding can be greatly improved by a direct involvement of the subject in a morally significant situation. Along this line of reasoning, indeed, we could imagine that "[h]aving a certain experience—being directly involved in or witnessing a morally significant situation firsthand—can expand one's capacity of moral understanding" (Sliwa 2017: 543). Moreover, despite the broad debate in epistemology on the transmissibility or not of understanding,[17] moral understanding seems to be of a particular sort. It may be affirmed that, even conceding that perhaps understanding can be

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[16] It has to be clarified that there is no unanimity on that question. Recall the aforementioned distinction between reductionists and non-reductionists. It is interesting to note that while reductionists hold that moral understanding can be conveyed via testimony and take this fact as an important aspect of their view, non-reductionists hold that the fact that testimony can convey moral knowledge, but not moral understanding, is evidence that understanding differs from knowledge.

[17] For a defense of the view that understanding can be transmitted via testimony, see, e.g., Malfatti 2019, 2020.

transmitted at some degree via testimony, moral understanding is particularly hard to transmit (Callahan 2018). This seems to be what David Enoch thinks when he writes that "there seems to be something objectionably cold about a moral judgment that is based solely on deference to the expert" (2014: 256). Here, the "coldness" of a moral judgement acquired by testimony underlines how there is something lacking in morally deferring to someone else. More precisely, what lacks in a "cold" moral judgment seems to be an emotional engagement of the subject with the moral issue at stake. In this sense, it is plausible to think that, as Laura Callahan suggests, "having emotional/motivational states appropriate to one's beliefs is distinctively important in the moral domain" (Callahan 2018: 447). If one adopts such a view on understanding in the moral domain, having moral understanding of *p* requires not only a cognitive grasping of moral reasons, but also an emotional and motivational engagement with those reasons. As things stand, the problems of moral testimony are to be traced back to the difficulty in achieving such an emotional engagement by relying on testimony.[18]

Thus, the problem with moral testimony stems from the fact that we cannot form moral sentiments, which are integral to moral understanding, by testimony.[19] Given that moral sentiments are desire-like attitudes, they cannot be true or false (Miller 2013). Therefore, to persuade someone to feel some sentiment, we could appeal to the desirability of having that sentiment or to the appropriateness of it (Fletcher 2016). However, we cannot feel a sentiment (like, e.g., anger or love) because someone else told us that such a sentiment is desirable or appropriate. We cannot, indeed, feel a sentiment at will. So, if we endorse a sentimentalist account of moral understanding, the thesis that moral understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony is strengthened. Once the relevance of emotions and motivations to moral understanding is recognized, moral testimony is even less likely to convey such moral understanding.

6. Moral Understanding and Truth

An understanding-based account of moral expertise allows us to explain the problems raised by moral testimony. Therefore, while moral testimony constitutes a problem for the realist conception of moral expertise, an understanding-based account of moral expertise can readily account for it. However, to assess whether an understanding-based account of moral expertise can count as a genuine alternative to the realist one, that moral understanding and moral knowledge relate in a different way to testimony is not enough. We need to discuss a second point concerning the relation between moral understanding and truth.

In philosophy of science, "the received view seems to be that understanding is […] factive just as knowledge is".[20] Here, to say that knowledge is factive is to say that, if S knows that *p*, then *p* is true; accordingly, to say that understanding is factive is to say that if S understands *p*, then *p* is true. As a consequence, S can understand, for instance, that the death penalty is morally wrong, only if the

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[18] This point has been clearly pointed out by Callahan: "my primary contention is that reconceiving understanding to include emotional and motivational engagement with reasons can resolve worries for the understanding explanation of the fishiness of moral testimony" (2018: 452).
[19] That non-cognitive states are hard or impossible to acquire by testimony, has been particularly stressed by Howell 2014, Fletcher 2016, Callahan 2018.
[20] Mizrahi 2012: 237.

proposition "the death penalty is morally wrong" is true. But this would amount to fall in a realist view on morality and would make the reference to the notion of understanding rather than to that of knowledge redundant in the present context.[21] In other words, a factive conception of understanding cannot provide us with the right basis to develop an account of moral expertise that can be an alternative to the realist and knowledge-based account of moral expertise. If understanding is factive, even an understanding-based account of moral expertise risks to incur all the problems concerning moral testimony and moral deference which affect moral realism. Whether understanding is factive or not has been widely discussed in epistemology and philosophy of science and some interesting non-factive account of scientific understanding have been developed (Elgin 2007; de Regt 2015; Potochnik 2017).

The debate about factivity is far from settled. Nevertheless, non-factive accounts of understanding remain viable options, and we adopt such an approach for moral understanding. Although this approach to moral understanding is in the minority, some interesting accounts of non-factive moral understanding have been advanced (see, e.g., Zagzebski 2001). On a non-factive account, understanding why p is the case does not depend on p being true (cf. Bina, Bonicalzi, Croce 2024: 1057). We want to underline that when it comes to the moral domain, the thesis that understanding can be non-factive can be strengthened by referring to a distinctive feature of moral understanding. In the light of the discussion conducted so far, indeed, it seems that we are allowed to argue for the possibility that moral understanding denotes a partially non-cognitive process. In other words, it seems that we are entitled to sustain a sentimentalist account of moral understanding. A sentimentalist account of moral understanding can reinforce the non-factive characterization of it. Indeed, if emotion and motivation play a role in the process of moral understanding, such a process is not committed to grasping something "out there", but is grounded in our subjective responses. Thus, moral understanding depends on "people's evaluative starting points and circumstance" (Street 2010: 370).

If at first glance it might appear unacceptable (Howard 2018: 1066), there are some considerations that support the thesis that moral understanding is not completely a cognitive phenomenon. First of all, one might argue that non-cognitive features, such as emotions and motivations, play an important role in moral

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[21] It might be objected that claiming that a given moral proposition p is true does not necessarily means endorsing moral realism. There are, indeed, metaethical views that, though referring to the notion of moral truth, cannot be considered realist views on morality. This is the case of some versions of constructivism (e.g., Lenman 2012; Street 2010), expressivism (e.g., Gibbard 1990) and pragmatism (e.g., Kitcher 2011). In this respect, it is important to specify that the proposal developed in the present paper is consistent with those non-realist metaethical views because the notion of moral truth to whom they refer is significantly different from the realist one. On a realist view, the truth of p depends on some moral facts or properties that are independent from the subject S. So, according to the realist account of moral understanding, a subject S understands p if p is true and, more precisely, if p is true independently from the effort of S to understand it. On the contrary, on a non-realist view, moral truths, if they are established, depend on an effort by the subject S and are not subject-independent. Therefore, "truth and falsity in the normative domain must always be relativized to a particular practical point of view" (Street 2008: 224), that is the point of view of a moral subject. I thank an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to clarify this.

understanding. Support for a sentimentalist version of moral understanding comes from the everyday language: "[w]hen we speak of people being understanding, e.g., we do not mean that they have perspicuous insight into reasons and explanations. Rather, the virtue or trait of understanding seems quite closely related to empathy [...]" (Callahan 2018: 452). Indeed, "understanding people" are those who care about others and who are particularly good in attuning to others' emotional state.[22] Although philosophy of science is mainly focused on what it takes to understand the natural word, i.e., on scientific understanding, understanding in other domain clearly includes some variations, especially when it comes to understand people as it is in the moral domain.[23] Olivia Bailey discusses the idea of a "humane understanding" that "consists in the direct apprehension of the intelligibility of others' emotions" (2020: 2). What is important to stress is that, according to Bailey, this apprehension is based on empathy, which is described as the fundamental source of a particular form of understanding, i.e., understanding directed towards other people. If the main goal of scientific understanding is to explain or to predict natural phenomena, humane understanding does not mainly aim to predict others' actions or behavior. Understanding people can rather be better understood as a form of caring, insofar as human beings have a deep need to be humanely understood (Bailey 2020).

A second argument that might be maintained to support a sentimentalist account of moral understanding relies on the very nature of the process through which one comes to have some understanding of *p*, where *p* is a moral proposition. In this respect, having some moral understanding of *p* involves having some emotional and motivational responses towards *p*. If those response are lacking, we are allowed to think that one does not really understand the moral proposition in question.[24] Consider again the aforementioned example. Rosa does not really understand that the death penalty is morally wrong, because her utterance of that moral proposition is not accompanied by some emotional responses, such as, e.g., anger or sadness towards the death penalty, and motivational reactions, such as, e.g., the will to prevent that practice. If those conditions are lacking, i.e., if an appropriate emotional

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[22] It should be stressed that the appeal to everyday language is not intended as an argument *per se* in favor of a non-cognitivist view of moral understanding. If this were the case, it might be objected that the appeal to everyday language risks confusing having understanding (an epistemic achievement) with being understanding (a positive trait or disposition). Only if one adopts a form of non-cognitivism, will one accept that there can be a connection between being an understanding person and achieving moral understanding. In this regard, we must specify that we do not intend to argue here that understanding people necessarily have moral understanding, nor that non-understanding people cannot have moral understanding. Although, as we will argue in a moment, we think that emotions and empathy play a role in the process of moral understanding, the appeal to everyday language simply shows that, at a pre-reflective level, we tend to think that what characterizes understanding people is a certain emotional and motivational disposition. In other words, such an appeal is used more modestly to emphasize that a sentimental characterization of moral understanding is not as counterintuitive as it might seem at first sight. I thank an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to reflect on this.
[23] Stephen Grimm (2016) has clearly pointed out the distinction between understanding natural phenomena and understanding people, i.e., the distinction between "scientific understanding" and "humanistic understanding". Moreover, according to Grimm, this distinction plunges its roots in the work of Giambattista Vico (1725 [2002]) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1883 [1989]).
[24] On this, see again Callahan 2018: 452.

and motivational engagement with a given moral proposition does not occur, we have reasons to think that there is no moral understanding.

Now, a sentimentalist account of moral understanding can be framed within a non-cognitivist metaethical framework. This move can have at least two advantages. Firstly, a non-cognitivist perspective on moral expertise, as we have seen (§ 3), allows us to explain why the very notion of moral testimony is difficult to grasp, both theoretically and when we look at the phenomenology of how people interact in moral discourse. Given a sentimentalist conception of moral understanding (§ 5), the claim that deferring to others is not a good way to achieve moral understanding is even stronger. Therefore, firstly, non-cognitivism constitutes the metaethical perspective from which appropriately rethink not only the conception of moral understanding, but also the ones of moral expertise and moral testimony. Secondly, non-cognitivism offers a metaethical framework to develop a notion of moral expertise that can really count as an alternative to the one proposed by the moral realist.

7. A Non-Cognitivist Account of Moral Understanding

Let us consider a last point concerning the relation between non-cognitivism and moral understanding. The non-factive and sentimentalist characterization of moral understanding, as it has been presented here, aligns with non-cognitivism. On non-cognitivist views, epistemic states about moral issues are constituted by sentiments. To think that p is wrong is, at least in part, to have a negative sentiment towards p, or perhaps to have a higher-order positive attitude towards a negative sentiment towards p. Non-cognitivism is generally understood as a form of anti-realism about morality because, according to non-cognitivism, there are no moral facts or properties that exist independently of us. This does not mean that, on a non-cognitivist view, there are no "standard" and everything is permitted. The claim that there are no moral facts or properties "out there" in the world means that non-cognitivism is committed to the view that moral norms are not stance-independent. However, a very common objection is that if we accept non-cognitivism, we are forced to endorse either skeptical conclusions about morality or a radical form of relativism in metaethics. Contrary to that objection, some varieties of non-cognitivism, such as expressivism and some forms of constructivism, offer a way to avoid this slide into those unpalatable conclusions. According to those views, our moral statements are not descriptions of alleged moral facts or properties, rather they are something like the expression of moral attitudes or the construction of solution to practical problems (Chrisman 2010).

Now, if one assumes a non-cognitivist perspective of this sort, a non-factive account of moral understanding does not end up being a purely arbitrary process, rather it can still have a normative grip on us. Consider, for instance, the repudiation of slavery. It is plausible to suppose that at a certain point in human history, some people came to understand that slavery was unjust. To explain this process, the moral realist introduces some realist concept of moral truth: that slavery is unjust is true independently of any perspective; on this basis, when we come to understand that "slavery is unjust", we replace a false belief (e.g., "slavery is morally permissible") with a true belief (Huemer 2016). On the contrary, on a non-cognitivist view, one can still explain the process through which one comes to understand that slavery is unjust without being committed to a realist idea of moral truth. A non-cognitivist explanation can run as follows: today most of the

people agree that slavery is unjust; this means that they are repelled by keeping human beings in slavery. After having experienced a world in which slavery is abolished, they do not want to go back (Kitcher 2011: 175). In this sense, it is plausible to think that the understanding that one achieves that slavery is unjust implies a moral improvement. If we compare the world before the abolition of slavery and the world after the abolition of slavery, most of us would choose to live in the later state rather than in the earlier. This choice cannot be reduced to a mere subjective preference, but it indicates a deep transformation occurred in our moral outlook concerning the world in which we want to live and the human beings we want to be. What it is interesting to note is that although we can imagine a world in the future in which slavery is not officially banned anymore, it is hard to imagine a world in which we are able to renounce the claim that slavery ought to be banned. On a non-cognitivist view, we cannot account for moral judgments about, e.g., slavery in terms of truth, but rather in terms of understanding.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, a sentimentalist and non-realist account of moral understanding has been endorsed. Moral understanding has also been framed within a non-cognitivist view in metaethics in order to, on one hand, strengthen the standard explanation concerning the problems of moral testimony and, on the other hand, develop an account of moral expertise that is alternative to the realist one. This understanding-based account for moral expertise can constitute the starting point for further investigations on related issues, such as, e.g., moral experts and moral testimony. In this respect, given such an understanding-based account of moral expertise, it might be asked who are, if any, the moral experts. As Hills suggests, "[t]here is no point merely deferring to an expert when you are trying for understanding rather than knowledge" (2009: 126). These questions need to be explored further. Meanwhile, in the light of the previous considerations, that there are moral experts is controversial. More precisely, although we can develop a non-cognitivist account of moral expertise, a non-cognitivist view of metaethics has no room for the strong conception of the moral expert offered by moral realism.

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