IN DEFENSE OF DEPENDENCE ON MORAL TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I defend dependence on moral testimony. To that end, against pessimistic views regarding dependence on moral testimony I argue that moral testimony can confer epistemic warrant and that dependence on it is not at odds with good moral agency. I show how going defenses of dependence on moral testimony have portrayed it as second-best by centering on how and why it is an important means to overcoming our defects. I argue that the value of dependence on moral testimony goes beyond this: it is not only our flaws and limitations that justify our dependence on moral testimony, but also the importance of such dependence for the flourishing of our intimate relationships. On my view, dependence on moral testimony is not simply for those who cannot realize the ideals of moral agency; it is among those ideals.
I spent last evening at a park in the center of the town where I was raised, surrounded by friends and family. When my mom met her best friend in Wichita, Kansas in the 1950s, they laid the foundation for a friendship that would last a lifetime, and that would have their children, and their children’s children, gathered together in Salem, Oregon in 2015.

As I chatted, and held babies, and listened to music played by my mom’s best friend’s son—one of my closest childhood friends—I was awestruck by the resonance of a friendship that began nearly 60 years ago.

Sitting down to write these acknowledgements, my mind kept returning to last night’s scene. It finally occurred to me that it was a moment that manifested one of the most central themes of this dissertation: the power and importance of intimate relationships. It also served as a perceptible reminder of the overwhelming support that encircles me in all matters, including writing this dissertation.

Chief among my supporters in writing this dissertation are my committee members: Mark Murphy, Karen Stohr, and Maggie Little, who together taught me how to do professional philosophy. Mark, Karen, and Maggie are brilliant scholars and excellent teachers. They continuously model analytic rigor, charitability, and hard work. They are also wonderful human beings, who by their warmth, humor, and kindness, made the process of writing this dissertation enjoyable.

My family is also an invaluable support. My dad, John, (perhaps unwittingly) set me on the path to becoming a philosopher: he engaged me in my earliest philosophical conversations and always said to me as I left the house, “Do your own thinking.” My mom, Jane, has always taken care to pave that path; by her hard work and selflessness, she ensured the many educational opportunities that have been made available to me. My brothers and sisters—Duffin, Anne, Molly, Mike, and Flossie—have all, at various times, pulled double- or even triple-duty as caregivers, cheerleaders, friends, and mentors.

My partner, Nick, has been my most tireless supporter—always ready to ease my doubts, make me laugh, and read draft after draft of this dissertation, even after a long day’s work. It is with him that I have come to most deeply appreciate the value of reciprocal dependence.

To each of you, I am profoundly grateful.

Paddy
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CHAPTER I

THE ASYMMETRY PROBLEM FOR MORAL TESTIMONY

There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators.

—David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

Much of what we know, or are at least justified in believing, we know on the basis of others’ testimony. You know that your friend is the youngest of six children because she told you; you know that your local high school football team lost last night’s game because you read it in the paper; you know that you have high blood pressure because your nurse practitioner diagnosed you. In short, our lives as knowers and doers are characterized by massive epistemic dependence. The observation that our beliefs and (at least purported) knowledge depend extensively on testimony—an observation which we can trace back to Hume, and surely further—Jonathan Adler aptly labels the far-reaching dependence thesis.\(^1\)

We are reminded just how far-reaching our dependence on testimony is by C.A.J. Coady:

[M]any of us have never seen a baby born, nor have most of us examined the circulation of the blood nor the actual geography of the world nor any fair sample of the laws of the land, nor have we made the observations

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\(^1\) Adler (2002).
that lie behind our knowledge that the lights in the sky are heavenly bodies immensely distant.\(^2\)

These are all examples of what we know on the basis of testimony about paradigmatically non-moral matters.

However, the reach of our dependence on testimony also extends to moral matters. A child comes to believe that eating meat is wrong because he is told so by his parents, who formed the belief that it is wrong upon hearing that the leading expert in animal ethics believes so; your mother tells you that failing to thank your aunt for your Christmas gift is inconsiderate, and even though you do not like it and do not by your own lights see why you should go out of your way to give thanks, you adopt your mother’s belief; your partner tells you, and on the basis of his telling you, you come to believe that his boss made an unfair hiring decision. What is more, many of the moral beliefs that we form on the basis of others’ say-so we continue to endorse without reflecting on the content of those beliefs. We may do so because we are unreflective sorts of people, or because no one has challenged us to reflect on the relevant beliefs, or because time has passed and it has become practically irrelevant whether those beliefs were true or false.\(^3\)

So, the far-reaching dependence thesis is true for non-moral and moral testimony.

But while it is relatively plain to see that dependence on moral testimony is pervasive in our moral lives, it is far more challenging to articulate the nature and assess the

\(^2\) Coady (1992, 82).

\(^3\) The latter possibility seems particularly likely in the case of particular moral beliefs about particular states of affairs; for example, if someone told you back in the first year of college that her professor was sexist, and that was twenty years ago and the professor is dead now, you might still believe it and have not the slightest reason to bring it back to mind or reconsider it.
justifiability—epistemic and moral—of such dependence. These are the tasks I undertake in this dissertation. Ultimately, my aim is to defend dependence on moral testimony.⁴ In this chapter I set out on this project by giving an account of the nature of dependence on moral testimony and locating and unpacking the central point of contention in the ongoing debate about it.⁵

1. **The Asymmetry Thesis**

At the heart of the sort of objection to dependence on moral testimony I want in this dissertation to explore is the asymmetry thesis: while testimony is a perfectly fine source for non-moral belief, there is something problematic about basing one’s moral beliefs on it. To put it another way, there is a “difference in kind between moral and non-moral matters when it comes to taking testimony.”⁶ It is this sort of objection to moral testimony—rather than more global skepticism about testimony *per se*—that forms the core of the recent debate.

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⁴ My focus is on the epistemology and ethics of *depending* on moral testimony; I acknowledge, however, that there is a whole host of interesting issues surrounding the epistemology and ethics of *testifying* about moral matters.

⁵ In this chapter I am just concerned to give a lay of the land, so to speak, in order to give my readers a sense of the current, ongoing debate about dependence on moral testimony and in order to begin to situate my contributions to this debate. I will return to address the going views of dependence on moral testimony in far greater detail in subsequent chapters.

1.1 **Pessimism: Epistemic and Practical**

Those who have come to be known as “pessimists” about dependence on moral testimony defend some version of the asymmetry thesis. Pessimists do not impugn all dependence on moral testimony. They agree that it is acceptable and even desirable for children to depend on moral testimony in forming their moral beliefs. But when it comes to mature moral agents, pessimists maintain that there is something deeply problematic about them forming their moral beliefs on the basis of moral testimony. Pessimism about dependence on moral testimony is of two main types, what I will call “epistemic” and “practical.”

Epistemic pessimists about dependence on moral testimony hold, most basically, that while you can get epistemic warrant rising to the level of knowledge (or justified belief) from non-moral testimony, you cannot get the same level of epistemic warrant from moral testimony. Epistemic pessimists do not doubt the possibility of moral knowledge, generally—or, at least, their worries about dependence on moral testimony are independent of any worries about moral knowledge that they might have. Rather, epistemic pessimists hold that even though both non-moral and moral knowledge are possible, epistemic warrant for non-moral beliefs can be transmitted by testimony, whereas epistemic warrant for moral beliefs cannot be so transmitted.

In contrast, practical pessimists allow, at least for the sake of argument, that you can get moral knowledge from dependence on moral testimony in just the same way you can get non-moral knowledge from non-moral testimony. But they maintain that

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7 The terms “pessimists” and “optimists” are originally from Hopkins (2007), although they are now widely used in the literature on dependence on moral testimony.

8 See, for example, Cholbi (2007), Coady (1995), Driver (2006), and McGrath (2009).
nevertheless dependence on moral testimony is *practically* problematic. On one of the most pressing versions of practical pessimism, the badness of depending on moral testimony is traceable to the fact that dependence on moral testimony is in tension with the ideal to have and use moral understanding.  

According to some practical pessimists, moral understanding cannot be had solely by way of dependence on moral testimony, because moral understanding goes beyond mere moral knowledge; it involves various practical abilities, including the ability to grasp a proposition’s right-making reasons. Since the focus, here, is placed on moral understanding—an epistemic notion—it might be tempting to see this as a version of epistemic pessimism. But we should resist this temptation. Alison Hills, a practical pessimist who emphasizes the importance of moral understanding, explains why:

> I have argued that if you want to acquire and to use moral understanding you have excellent reasons not to defer to moral testimony… But, what kind of reasons are these? It seems they are grounded in your wanting moral understanding, and in moral understanding being valuable. In other words, they are *practical* reasons not *epistemic* ones.  

Hills’ view—and, indeed, all the other going criticisms of dependence on moral testimony that focus on the importance of moral understanding—is best understood as a version of practical, rather than epistemic, pessimism because moral understanding is appealed to as important to central aspects of our moral agency (e.g., moral worth, moral virtue, etc.).

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9 See, for example, Crisp (2014), Hills (2009), Hopkins (2007), and Nickel (2001).

10 Hills (2010, 223).

11 I will explain how moral understanding is portrayed as an ideal of moral agency in greater detail in Chapter III.
1.2 Optimism

Optimists about dependence on moral testimony argue that there is nothing problematic, either epistemically or morally, about dependence on moral testimony per se. Optimists usually employ two sorts of arguments. First, they attempt to deliver debunking explanations of the asymmetry thesis. They do this by giving alternative explanations of the supposed badness of depending on moral testimony in the cases that pessimists use when motivating their views, or by showing that pessimists’ arguments threaten to impugn non-moral testimony as well as moral testimony. Second, optimists offer positive arguments in defense of dependence on moral testimony.

My own view will add to this body of work. I will be arguing against epistemic and practical pessimists: I will argue moral testimony can transmit epistemic warrant and the fact that moral testimony does not give rise to moral understanding is not, by itself, a basis for criticizing agents who depend on it. I will also be defending a new version of optimism about dependence on moral testimony. Extant defenses of moral testimony are motivated in terms of agents’ biases or relative epistemic disadvantages. They hold that dependence on moral testimony can be valuable as a way of remedying our flaws or shortcomings. As Eric Wiland puts it, “It would be foolish and stubborn to always go it alone. Recognizing your own naïveté and limitations, you are wise to defer to those who know better.”12 Going optimist defenses of dependence on moral testimony, including those put for by Wiland, Jones, Enoch, and Sliwa, are of this sort; they center on how our epistemic limitations work to justify our dependence on moral testimony.13 While I find

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13 Wiland (2015); Jones (1999); Enoch (2014); and Sliwa (2012).
these defenses plausible, I will contend that they do not fully capture the value of dependence on non-moral testimony. Such dependence, I will argue, can have non-remedial value; my view, more specifically, is that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can express the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship.

2. MOVING FORWARD

In the remainder of the present chapter, I set out more fully the central ideas of moral testimony and dependence that will be at issue in this dissertation. In the subsequent two chapters, I sketch out and respond to what I take to be the best arguments against dependence on moral testimony and in favor of the asymmetry thesis. More specifically, in Chapter II, I challenge epistemic pessimists by arguing that testimonial warrant is conferred in the same way for moral matters as for non-moral matters. In Chapter III, I take on the moral pessimists’ worry that dependence on moral testimony is at odds with good moral agency because it is in tension with the ideal to have and use moral understanding. I concede that moral testimony cannot on its own confer moral understanding (although I contend it often sets one up to ultimately achieve moral understanding), but I argue that this fact does not constitute a reasonable practical criticism of agents who depend on moral testimony.

In Chapter IV I set out my own positive view. I argue that the value of dependence on moral testimony goes beyond that of remedying our epistemic limitations: there is non-remedial value in developing a disposition to depend on moral testimony, and, more specifically, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony. Such a
disposition, I contend, can be instrumentally valuable in ways that have gone heretofore unrecognized in the moral testimony literature; that is, the instrumental value of dependence on moral testimony is not entirely the result of its ability to remedy defects or deficiencies in oneself as a knower. What is more, such a disposition can be non-instrumentally valuable as a constituent part of the ideal of friendship. My argument here places the value of trust at center stage in the debate about dependence on moral testimony. I conclude Chapter IV by showing how the focus on dispositions equips my view with the resources to successfully respond to worries that are apt to plague views nearby in the literature.

In Chapter V, I investigate the limits of the non-remedial, non-instrumental value of dependence on moral testimony. More specifically, I address two worries: first, the worry that it is epistemically irrational and morally irresponsible to depend on friends’ moral testimony when we don’t know that they are reliable; second, the worry that dependence on moral testimony is in tension with the ideal of autonomy. To the first worry I respond that it can still be epistemically and morally valuable to be disposed to depend on friends’ moral testimony even when we’re uncertain or have doubts about their reliability. To the second worry I respond that not all ceding of agency is heteronomous and that we cannot altogether rule out the value of depending on others’ testimony even when it concerns our most central and life-shaping moral beliefs.

3. **What Is Dependence on Moral Testimony?**

I turn now to explore the key concepts of this dissertation. What is meant by moral
testimony, and what is meant by dependence on it? I address these questions in turn.

3.1 The Speech Act of Moral Testimony

For some the word “testimony” conjures up images of courtrooms and witness stands. But for the purposes of this dissertation, I am concerned with ‘natural,’ rather than ‘formal,’ testimony.\(^\text{14}\) Formal testimony is the sort of institutional testimony that is given during trials and depositions and the like. In contrast, natural testimony is the testimony that occurs in ordinary, everyday circumstances: a speaker, \(S\), tells a hearer, \(H\), that the nearby coffee shop is just around the corner; \(S\) tells \(H\) that the 18th amendment was repealed by the 21st amendment in 1933; \(S\) tells \(H\) that the newborn’s carseat must be rear-facing.\(^\text{15}\) The formal/natural distinction is not meant to track the relative importance of the testimony. Some formal testimony seems clearly less important than some natural testimony, and vice versa. Formal testimony can be about trivial, unimportant matters while natural testimony is sometimes very important (e.g., testimony about how to properly use a carseat). From here on, when I write of “testimony” I mean to refer to natural testimony.

Testimony, both non-moral and moral, is a speech act, or, in Austin’s words, an illocutionary act; that is, an utterance, or other communicative act, that has a performative

\(^{14}\) For a longer explanation of the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘formal’ testimony see Chapter 1 of Coady (1992).

\(^{15}\) In keeping with the literature on the nature of testimony (see, for example, Cullison [2010] and Lackey [2008]) and for simplicity’s sake, I write in terms of “speakers” and “hearers” of testimony. I acknowledge, however, that testimony can obviously take non-verbal forms (it can, for example, take visual forms as in books and documentaries).
function, e.g., asserting, testifying, commanding, requesting, promising, etc.\textsuperscript{16} Now, just what kind of speech act comprises testimony is a topic of much discussion. One particular point of contention is what role, if any, audience plays in the analysis of ‘testimony.’ According to many speech act theories, testimony has a three-part structure (speaker-hearer-content). The following example from Peter Pagin illustrates this idea:

“It may be said that I failed to \textit{testify to} him that the station was closed, since he had already left the room when I said so, but that I still \textit{asserted that} it was closed, since I believed he was still there.”\textsuperscript{17} Alternatively, however, some have contended that testimony can have a two-part structure. For example, Andrew Cullison writes, “Imagine you overhear someone talking to himself or herself, or you come across a private diary. Suppose in both situations the person mentions the current location of the president. It seems that this should count as testimonial evidence.”\textsuperscript{18} So, while some philosophers have defended the view that address is necessary for a speech act to even count as an instance of testimony,\textsuperscript{19} others have denied this.\textsuperscript{20}

In this dissertation I will leave open the question of whether address marks an important difference between the speech acts of testifying and asserting. As we will see, in Chapters II and III the key issues under discussion involve only the assertoric force of testimony. In Chapters IV and V, however, when I move to specific claims about the non-

\textsuperscript{16} Austin (1962).

\textsuperscript{17} Pagin (2014). Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{18} Cullison (2010, 115).

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, McMyler (2012) and Fricker (2006).

\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, Lackey (2008).
remedial value of depending on moral testimony, I will be defending these claims on the supposition that testimony functions as a particular type of address, namely as an invitation to accept the proposition at issue on the speaker’s say-so. Even those who deny that address is necessary to testimony can still allow that some cases of testimony involve address in this sense. So, whether address is a part of the best analysis of testimony is not an issue on which I have to take a stand for the success of my project. For those who deny that address is necessary to testimony, my arguments in Chapters IV and V should just be taken to apply to the cases of testimony that (contingently, on their view) involve address.

How does the speech act of testimony relate to the speech act of advice? Optimist Paulina Sliwa claims that moral testimony and moral advice are of a kind; she writes:

Moral advice and moral testimony aren’t fundamentally different. Rather, moral advice just is a subclass of moral testimony. It’s testimony about practical questions: questions about whether we ought to do something, whether it would be a good thing for us to do it, or what a good way of doing something is. Since many moral questions are practical questions, questions about what we should do, much of moral testimony takes the form of moral advice.21

Sliwa’s contention that moral advice is moral testimony is essential to her defense of dependence on moral testimony. Her argument, in outline, runs as follows: she presents cases of dependence on moral advice that are “intuitively unproblematic,” and then argues that since moral advice just is moral testimony it follows that many cases of dependence on moral testimony are unproblematic.

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21 Sliwa (2012, 184).
However, moral testimony is testimony, which is a kind of assertive, and moral advice is advice, which is a kind of directive.\textsuperscript{22} Let me explain. How one carves up speech acts, including assertives and directives, is going to be controversial, since theories of speech acts themselves are controversial. For example, there are competing theories about the success conditions of speech acts, the nature and importance of speaker intentions, and, as we’ve seen, the role (including the very presence) of audience. But to draw a distinction between assertives, such as testimony, and directives, such as advice, we need not adjudicate between these competing theories in their finer details; in my view, any theory of speech acts will accommodate something like the distinction that I am invoking. In Searle’s terms, assertives have a “word-to-world” direction of fit; the point of assertives is to report on states of affairs. When I testify that it is raining outside, the point of my utterance is to represent how the world really is (i.e., that it is raining). Directives, in contrast, have a “world-to-word” direction of fit; the point of directives is to get the hearer to bring about, or refrain from bringing about, certain states of affairs. When I advise you to take an umbrella with you, the point of my utterance is to get you to do something (i.e., pack your umbrella).\textsuperscript{23}

While Sliwa rightly recognizes that moral advice is fundamentally about practical matters, she overlooks the ways in which this signals a distinction between moral advice, which is fundamentally directed toward a change in agents’ actions, and moral testimony, which is fundamentally directed toward a change in agents’ beliefs. Moral advice and moral testimony may overlap, but they need not. To see how one might testify, even

\textsuperscript{22} See Austin (1962) and Searle (1979). They both refer to assertives as “constantives,” as well.

\textsuperscript{23} Searle (1983).
about practical matters, but not advise, imagine someone telling you: “I of course have no interest at all in directing you in a reasonable way to behave—I hate your guts and I am only telling you this because I have an insincerity detector attached to me—but the best way for you to behave, morally speaking, is to Φ.” In such a case, it hardly seems that you are being advised, because the speaker is avidly disclaiming any interest in the guidance of your conduct. But the speaker is obviously putting herself forward as representing the truth about what you ought to do.

To see how moral advice and moral testimony might come apart in the other direction, i.e., how one may advise but not testify, consider Sliwa’s example of WEDDING ADVICE:

**WEDDING ADVICE:** 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. They decide to ask a friend whose judgment they trust.

Now, imagine that Tom and Sara’s friend says to them, “I advise you to ask Tom’s parents for a greater contribution.” A plausible interpretation of what their friend is doing in saying this is she is directing them to do something, i.e., to ask Tom’s parents for more money. Depending on the conversational context, perhaps it would be reasonable to think that their friend is also testifying that the couple should ask Tom’s parents for more money. But she might not be. For example, imagine that Tom and Sara’s friend thinks that there is no fact of the matter about what would be best for the couple to do; she thinks they face a decision between two alternatives that are morally on a par, so to speak. If that is what is going on in the case, their friend might only be taking herself to
be giving the couple practical guidance: she might very well hope that she helps Tom and Sarah decide what to do, but not what to believe. Contra Sliwa, then, it looks like not all moral advice is moral testimony.

To briefly sum up, testimony is at least assertion; that is, it is a speech act with a word-to-world direction of fit, the point of which is to represent the world as it is. Additionally, testimony is not necessarily advice, and vice versa. What is moral testimony? Moral testimony is testimony with distinctively moral content. The moral content of moral testimony can be quite varied. For example, consider the following two examples:

VEGETARIAN: Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. She knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.24

WEDDING TESTIMONY: 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. They decide to ask a friend. She tells them that it is permissible to ask the wealthier family for a greater contribution, and Tom and Sara, knowing that she is normally trustworthy and reliable, believe her.25

In VEGETARIAN the moral testimony is about right action at the level of a general principle, while in WEDDING TESTIMONY the moral testimony is about a particular state of affairs. We can imagine these cases slightly differently so that we get an even fuller

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24 This case is discussed by Hills (2009), McGrath (2009), and Sliwa (2012).

25 I adapted this example from Sliwa (2012, 184). The changes I made were in order to make it more clearly a case of moral testimony, rather than a case of moral advice, for reasons spelled out above.
sense of the variability of moral content in moral testimony. For example, we can imagine that Eleanor’s friend tells her that people who eat meat are cruel. Or we can imagine Tom and Sara’s friend tells them that people who ask for money to enjoy luxuries like weddings are intemperate. In these cases, the speakers’ moral testimonies involve appraisals of character rather than action, and thick (i.e., “cruel” and “intemperate”) rather than thin (i.e., “wrong” and “permissible”) moral terms. These examples illustrate what seems plain from our own experiences, that moral testimony can occur at different levels of generality (e.g., at the level of principles, particular cases, with thick and thin moral terms, etc.) and can be about different Moral Domains (e.g., about right action, character, etc.). One of my aims in this dissertation is to capture a more textured picture of the normative topology of dependence on moral testimony than has up to this point been offered, because (as I argue in subsequent chapters) our epistemic and moral assessments of dependence on moral testimony will often be sensitive to these differences.

3.2 Dependence on Moral Testimony

What is it to depend on testimony? For the purposes of this dissertation, for $H$ to depend on $S$’s testimony that $p$ is for $H$ to believe that $p$ on the basis of $S$’s saying that $p$—more specifically, to believe it by way of taking $S$’s statement as a sufficient reason for believing $p$. 26 This way of cashing out dependence has precedence in action theory: to

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26 To depend on moral testimony it is not sufficient to take a testifier’s testimony as sufficient reason for belief, for that is consistent with epistemic akrasia (taking oneself to have reason for belief, without actually so believing).
treat someone as a practical authority is to treat her directives as a sufficient reason for doing what she directs you to do.\textsuperscript{27}

This way of characterizing dependence on testimony helps to distinguish it from other cases in which another’s statement that \( p \) might be causally related to our coming to believe \( p \) that do not count as dependence on testimony. Dependence on testimony, for instance, does not include cases in which \( S \)’s testimony merely reminds \( H \) of something she already knew, but that she just was not occurrently believing; cases in which \( S \)’s utterance causes \( H \)’s belief, but not in virtue of the content of \( S \)’s utterance (consider Jennifer Lackey’s example: If I were to sing “I have a soprano voice” in a soprano voice and you came to know this \textit{entirely} on the basis of hearing my soprano voice, your belief would not depend on the content of my testimony);\textsuperscript{28} and cases in which \( S \)’s testimony prompts \( H \)’s reflections on the matter at hand, and \( H \) comes to adopt \( S \)’s belief on its own merits through a process of deliberation.

In this dissertation, and in ongoing debates about dependence on moral testimony more generally, it is posited that the \( S \) and \( H \) share all of the same non-moral information, which is to say that the only relevant information that \( S \) has and that \( H \) does not have is moral information. These are cases of \textit{pure moral dependence}, and in such cases, “one in effect treats the person to whom one defers as having purely moral information that one lacks.”\textsuperscript{29} Pure moral dependence is properly contrasted with \textit{impure moral dependence},

\textsuperscript{27} See, for example, Raz (1985).

\textsuperscript{28} Lackey (2011, 316).

\textsuperscript{29} McGrath (2009, 322).
which involves depending on another’s testimony for both moral and non-moral information.

Whether dependence on moral testimony is pure or impure concerns the extent to which such dependence involves reliance on the testifier for knowledge of the relevant non-moral facts. This is compatible with there being a range of possibilities of what sorts of moral information S possesses and H lacks even in cases of pure moral dependence. At one extreme, H may depend upon S’s moral testimony that p and utterly lack an appreciation of the sorts of considerations that are truth-makers for p. Alternatively, H may have a sense of what sorts of moral considerations support p, but in deliberating about whether p is the case she may turn to S for guidance because she is unsure of how to weigh these considerations. This seems one plausible way to read WEDDING TESTIMONY: Tom and Sara are sensitive to the main moral considerations in play, but they are just unsure about how to weigh those considerations. We can imagine, for example, that Tom and Sara understand that in one sense it seems fair to ask both sets of parents for an equal contribution, but in another sense it seems fair to ask each set of parents for a contribution that is proportional to their income or wealth; they are just not sure, all things considered, how these considerations play out and so they turn to a reliable friend for her moral testimony. Alternatively, it may be the case that S and H share a commitment to the same moral norm, but H depends on S to figure out when the norm applies. This seems to capture what is going on with Karen Jones’ example of Peter, who lives in a housing cooperative and is questioning whether or not to depend on the testimony of the women in the house about their decisions to reject three potential co-op members on the basis of their perceived sexism and racism:
**Peter:** Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of sexism and racism… Such blindness can sometimes indicate insincerity, but in Peter’s case it did not… He could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’ applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to non-egregious new cases.\(^{30}\)

In this case, Peter acknowledges and endorses non-sexist and non-racist principles, clearly acts on them in some contexts, and is willing to do so across contexts, but it is just that in some cases he is deeply unable to see when application of those principles is called for. So, Peter depends on his housemates not to weigh relevant moral considerations, but to tell him if they are even at stake in the first place. All of these count as cases of pure moral dependence, because in each \(H\) shares the same non-moral information with \(S\).

So there are varieties of dependence. There are also degrees. Recall: dependence involves taking another’s say-so as a reason for belief. When your dependence is strong, this reason entirely supports your belief. When your dependence is weak, this reason supports your belief, but it does so alongside other independent reasons that you have for believing. Consider the following example from Philip Nickel:

**Rent Money:** Suppose my friend has asked me to loan him some money for rent, but it seems likely to me that if I loan him the money it will allow him to avoid a crisis in which he might come to terms with his addiction to heroin and alcohol. I cannot decide what to do, and I ask my mother what she thinks. According to her, I ought to tell my friend that I will loan him some money as soon as he gets his life together.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{31}\) Nickel (2001, 256).
The way Nickel describes the case, it sounds as if he is already leaning towards refusing the loan, since he thinks it is likely that the money might enable his friend’s continued addictions. So it is plausible to think that his dependence on his mother’s testimony is a weak sort of dependence. On the other end of the spectrum, imagine that instead Nickel was leaning towards loaning his friend the money, but nevertheless he decided to set aside his leanings and depend on his mother’s testimony; this would be a much stronger sort of dependence.

I concede that it can be difficult to tease apart moral and non-moral considerations, and so to distinguish pure and impure dependence. Consider the following example, from Julia Driver:

**EXTRAORDINARY CARE:** Suppose that Stanley must decide whether or not to authorize keeping his ailing father alive using ‘extraordinary’ means. Suppose that Stanley has good reason to trust another person—one with experience, perhaps the family’s physician. Then, when the physician says ‘Trust me, Stanley, you ought not to do it—it will cause unnecessary pain’, doesn’t it make sense to say that Stanley knows it (given it is true and he believes it)?

Does Stanley, in trusting the family physician, learn something moral or non-moral? Or both? It is not clear. What is clear is that pessimists about moral testimony are committed to there being a distinction between the moral and the non-moral, as such a distinction undergirds the asymmetry thesis which they seek to defend. With the pessimists, I think it is plausible that there is such a distinction to be drawn. For example, we can imagine that if the exchange between Stanley and the family doctor were situated in the broader context of a discussion about the efficacy of various medical interventions, that Stanley is perhaps learning something primarily non-moral. In such a context, we could plausibly

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32 Driver (2006, 639). This case is also discussed by Hills (2010).
interpret the doctor’s claim about “unnecessary pain” as a claim about the probable outcome of some surgery, for example. Alternatively, however, we can imagine this exchange situated in the broader context of value-laden conversation about what constitutes a life worth living. In such a context, we can imagine that the physician’s testimony would be moral. While this strikes me as one plausible way to parse the moral and non-moral in the EXTRAORDINARY CARE case, I acknowledge that in this case and in general, how to distinguish between the two remains a controversial issue. The difficulty in discerning the moral and the non-moral is compounded by the fact that seemingly non-moral considerations may count as moral considerations in certain contexts.

In this dissertation, however, I am not going to engage in the task of giving a rigorous account of the distinction, because nothing in my dissertation seems to turn on some particular (and likely highly controversial) answer to the question of how we distinguish the moral and the non-moral. In putting forth my optimist defense of dependence on moral testimony, I assume there is a distinction to be made, whatever its particulars. But, since this is an assumption at the heart pessimists’ views as well, there is no criticism to be made of me for relying on a distinction made by my opponents.

Teasing apart varieties and degrees of dependence, and cases of pure and impure dependence, is also complicated by the fact that in practice it can be tricky to even recognize when we are at all dependent upon moral testimony. Consider Elizabeth Anscombe’s wonderfully visual description of our dependence on testimony: “Nor is what testimony gives us entirely a detachable part, like the thick fringe on a fat chunk of steak. It is more like the flecks and streaks of fat that are often distributed through good
meat; though there are lumps of pure fat as well.” Elizabeth Fricker puts the point more concretely:

[W]hen I visit Australia for the first time, in one way I gain personal confirmation of what I had previously known of only through testimony; but my knowledge that I am in Australia at all depends on testimony in multifarious and hard to pin down ways: initially I knew where my flight landed only through trusting the testimony of travel agent and airline personnel, and though the evidence of road signs and so forth may take over, these are all put there by human agency, and constitute a kind of testimony. Moreover, the controlling idea in terms of which I conceptualize and slot in all my own personal experiences—of the spherical planet earth with its land masses and seas, its countries, nations, and other geopolitical institutions, its history and prehistory—was acquired through testimony.

The extent of our dependence, and our very awareness of our dependence, are big issues that require far more subtle articulation than I can give them here. But, for present purposes, we can note that not only is our dependence upon testimony, moral and non-moral, far-reaching, it is intricately woven into the fabric of our lives.

However difficult it may be to recognize when we are dependent on testimony or to parse the moral from the non-moral, and so to distinguish between pure and impure dependence, the distinction between pure and impure dependence is, given the coherence of the distinction between moral and non-moral facts, a coherent one. Imagine that you and I know all the premises of an argument, yet you know that it is a valid argument and I do not. Maybe I lack the skills to assess the argument, or maybe I just have not had time to work it out on my own. Imagine that you tell me it is valid, and I believe you. This is a case of pure logical dependence. It does not strike me that there is any reason to think that we cannot have something analogous when it comes to moral belief: we both know all of

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33 Anscombe (1979, 143-144).

34 Fricker (2006, 227).
the relevant non-moral facts, I just lack the skills to properly make moral judgments regarding those facts or I just have not had time to think it through on my own, and so I believe you when you tell me your moral judgment concerning the situation. This is pure moral dependence.

The distinction between pure and impure moral dependence is also a useful one. It is helpful to posit that the cases that we are interested in are cases of pure moral dependence in order that we may isolate as much as possible the phenomenon we are examining. Further, pure moral dependence is, *ceteris paribus*, more controversial than impure dependence. So, by focusing on cases of pure moral dependence we take on the hardest cases in trying to defend dependence on moral testimony; if successful in vindicating these harder cases, we also defend the less controversial cases of impure dependence.

To sum up: I have proposed that for the purposes of isolating the phenomenon of dependence on moral testimony that is the concern of the current literature on the topic and of this dissertation we should focus on cases in which the moral testimony is natural (rather than formal) and pure (rather than impure), and cases in which $H$ depends on $S$’s testimony, whereby we understand dependence to mean, roughly, that $H$ believes $S$ on the basis of taking $S$’s saying to her that $p$ as sufficient reason for believing $p$. I have recognized that the content of moral testimony can be at different levels of generality and about different moral domains, and that there are varieties and degrees of pure dependence on moral testimony.
CHAPTER II

EPISTEMIC PESSIMISM

Recall, from Chapter I, the *asymmetry thesis*: while testimony is a perfectly fine source for non-moral belief, there is something problematic about basing one’s moral beliefs on it. Epistemic pessimists’ argument for the asymmetry thesis is that moral testimony fails to transmit epistemic warrant as non-moral testimony does. My aim in this chapter is to reject epistemic pessimism by defending the following:

**NO DIFFERENCE THESIS:** there is no in principle difference between the transmission of epistemic warrant by moral and non-moral testimony.

My strategy in this chapter is as follows: in Section 1 I clarify the epistemic pessimists’ challenge to moral testimony, and so the scope of this chapter. Then, in Section 2, I give a direct argument in defense of the **NO DIFFERENCE THESIS**. The main thrust of my argument is that there is a good *prima facie* case to be made for the thesis, namely, that it is supported by all of the major going epistemological views of testimonial warrant, both reductionist and non-reductionist. In Section 3 I consider five attempts to undermine the **NO DIFFERENCE THESIS**, and argue that none of these attempts succeeds. So, in the absence of any other compelling criticisms, we are justified in accepting the **DIFFERENCE THESIS**.

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35 Sometimes non-reductionism is referred to as “anti-reductionism” (see, for example, Adler [2012]) or “credulism” (see, for example, Pritchard [2004]).
1. **The Scope of Epistemic Pessimism**

As I explained in Chapter I, epistemic pessimists are not concerned to cast doubt on the possibility of moral knowledge, generally. Rather, they grant (at least for the sake of argument) that both non-moral and moral knowledge are possible. Instead, the epistemic pessimist argues that, while epistemic warrant for non-moral beliefs can be transmitted by testimony, epistemic warrant for moral beliefs cannot be so transmitted.\(^\text{36}\)

To assess the merits of epistemic pessimism, then, in this chapter I will set aside worries about dependence on moral testimony that have been entertained in the literature but that are not principally about moral testimony. For example, one candidate explanation of the asymmetry thesis that has been widely entertained\(^\text{37}\) in the literature on moral testimony is that moral testimony is more problematic than non-moral testimony because there can be no moral knowledge.\(^\text{38,39}\) Alison Hills, for instance, explains this line of thinking as follows:

> If there is no moral knowledge, then one standard reason for trusting

\(^{36}\) See, for example, Cholbi (2007), Driver (2006), and McGrath (2009).

\(^{37}\) But, as far as I know, not defended.

\(^{38}\) See, for example, Enoch (2014), Hills (2013), Hopkins (2007), McGrath (2009 and 2011), and Sliwa (2012). While these philosophers consider this worry, they do not endorse it.

\(^{39}\) Alternatively, some people may be skeptical about the ability of moral testimony to transmit epistemic warrant not because they do not believe in moral knowledge, but because they believe that moral knowledge is fundamentally different from other forms of knowledge and that there are elements of it that are not transmissible via testimony. For instance, someone who holds a desire theory, according to which moral judgments are irreducible mental states that involve both cognitive and conative aspects, might think that moral testimony cannot transmit warrant because desires are not truth-apt. For now I will bracket this worry, although I suspect that even on a desire theory it might be possible to transmit epistemic warrant if the hearer were well-disposed to form the desire.
testimony—that you can gain knowledge—would not apply to moral testimony. This would explain the difference between moral testimony and non-moral testimony too.\textsuperscript{40}

In a similar vein, but explicitly linking the denial of moral knowledge with non-cognitivist metaethical views, Sarah McGrath writes,

> If some standard version of non-cognitivism is true, then our attitude toward pure moral deference can be explained: if (as Ayer would have it) my judging that eating meat is wrong is a matter of my expressing my own negative emotions toward eating meat, then it is unsurprising that we find moral deference problematic.\textsuperscript{41}

The basic idea seems to be that if moral judgments are not truth-apt, testifying about our moral judgments cannot transmit epistemic warrant (where ‘warrant’ is understood to refer to some kind of epistemic justification) because the very notion of our moral judgments being epistemically justified is a category mistake.

Another explanation of the asymmetry thesis that has been entertained in the literature roughly goes along the following lines: there can be no moral knowledge, and so no transmission of such knowledge by moral testimony, because moral disagreement precludes us from knowing the moral facts, if such there be.\textsuperscript{42, 43} As Hills explains this view: “There is a lot of disagreement in ethics, and this should undermine our confidence

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\textsuperscript{40} Hills (2013, 553).

\textsuperscript{41} McGrath (2009, 322).

\textsuperscript{42} See, for example, Hopkins (2007) and Hills (2013). While these philosophers consider this worry, they do not endorse it.

\textsuperscript{43} Or, a slightly different way of putting the concern about moral disagreement is in terms of our methods for settling such disagreements. The worry might be that while in cases of non-moral disagreement we very often agree about what would count as settling the matter one way or the other, in moral cases we remain divided across the board about what would settle our disagreements.
In order for moral disagreement to impede moral knowledge and the transmission of epistemic warrant by moral testimony, generally, it must be ubiquitous. For even optimists about moral testimony can grant that moral disagreement might render dependence on moral testimony problematic in some cases. To see this, consider again a case I presented in Chapter I that is widely discussed in the moral testimony literature:

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

Optimist Paulina Sliwa grants that Eleanor’s dependence on moral testimony is problematic. However, she argues that what is problematic about Eleanor’s deference is not specific to moral testimony. Rather, the badness of Eleanor’s deference is a function of her using testimony to resolve uncertainty regarding a matter about which “intelligent, well-informed and thoughtful people disagree.” Consistent with her optimism about dependence on moral testimony, Sliwa argues that this is in general a bad strategy for resolving uncertainty in the face of deep and wide disagreement, whether your

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45 Hills (2009, 94).

46 It looks like Sliwa is suggesting is that for one to be justified in depending on moral testimony one must be able to discern whether the claim being testified to is controversial. But it might be objected that to be able to discern whether the claim is controversial, would render the dependence rather weak, and so would render the defense of dependence on moral testimony rather weak. However, as I argue in Section 3.2 of this chapter, one might have a well-developed sense of whether the content of testimony is erroneous or whether it is controversial, and still be strongly dependent on the testimony in the sense of strong dependence that I articulated in Chapter I.
uncertainty is about moral or non-moral matters. Optimists like Sliwa, while willing to grant that disagreement can at times render dependence on moral testimony morally problematic, nevertheless maintain that not all areas of morality are subject to deep disagreement, even areas that might seem controversial. So the epistemic pessimists’ worry about moral disagreement is that such disagreement is so prevalent as to undermine dependence on moral testimony not just in certain cases, but generally.

I have my doubts about the plausibility of non-cognitivism, and about whether non-cognitivist views have been aptly portrayed in the debate about dependence on moral testimony. I also have my doubts about the formidability of the argument from disagreement as a challenge to moral knowledge. However, I will not take up these substantive metaethical issues here, because I take them to be orthogonal to the ongoing debate about dependence on moral testimony. These issues are not directly relevant to an examination of moral testimony because they are about moral knowledge in general, and not about testimonial moral knowledge in particular.

Sliwa’s critique of Vegetarian has strong resonances with defenses of what has come to be known as a “safety” condition on knowledge, although Sliwa herself does not put it in these terms. The basic idea of a safety condition is that S knows that p only if S could not have easily falsely believed p. If the ethics of vegetarianism is a matter of sustained disagreement amongst reasonable, well-informed people, then Eleanor could have quite easily falsely believed p.

It strikes me that McGrath has caricatured non-cognitivism by portraying it in its crudest form. For example, non-cognitivist Allan Gibbard (2006) attempts to account for and defend many of our ordinary moral practices while maintaining his anti-realist metaphysical commitments (thus earning him the label “quasi-realist”). Gibbard appropriates paradigmatic cognitivist talk and contends that even according to his non-cognitivist views we can speak of moral judgments as meaningful and true.

It is also worth noting that in the case of crude non-cognitivism, the asymmetry would be based on the weirdness of deference, not on the inappropriateness of it. So it is far from clear that non-cognitivists of this stripe would have an easy time explaining why dependence on moral testimony is problematic, as McGrath suggests they would.
I acknowledge that in setting aside worries about the possibility of moral knowledge, I might lose the interest of those who, for metaphysical or epistemological reasons, do not accept the possibility of moral knowledge in the first place. Nevertheless, even those who do not accept the possibility of moral knowledge need not necessarily deny my central claims in this chapter about dependence on moral testimony, for I am happy to allow that these claims have a conditional status, e.g., there are cases in which if a given speaker has moral knowledge, that knowledge can be transmitted via moral testimony.

2. **The No Difference Thesis and the Epistemology of Testimony**

One of the main topics that has been taken up in the epistemology of testimony is how we get epistemic warrant from depending on what others tell us. Two main theories of testimonial warrant have emerged: reductionism and non-reductionism. In this section my aim is to show that we have no particular initial reason to be suspicious of the transmission of warrant by moral testimony, for neither of these views of how and when testimony transmits warrant appeals to features of testimonial exchanges that are special to non-moral, rather than moral, matters. To be clear: it is not my purpose here to advocate for a particular epistemological view of testimony. Rather, my aim is to show that whichever view you espouse, there is no reason to be suspicious of moral testimony built into that view.

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49 A number of hybrid views have also been put forth and defended in the literature (see, for example, Lackey [2006]). I do not explicitly address these views out of a concern for length and because I take it that what I say of reductionist and non-reductionist views could be modified, *mutatis mutandis*, to apply to these hybrid views.
2.1 Reductionism and Non-Reductionism

Reductionism about testimonial warrant, a view espoused by Jonathan Adler and Elizabeth Fricker, among others, is often traced back to Hume:

> The reason, why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them.\(^{51}\)

The basic idea is that in order to have epistemic entitlement to depend on testimony, hearers must have reasons for believing that the testimony is reliable that are independent of the testimony itself. These reasons might come from perception, memory, or inductive inference, for example. Jennifer Lackey labels calls this the Positive-Reasons Component of reductionism: “justification is conferred on testimonial beliefs by the presence of appropriate positive reasons on the part of hearers.”\(^{52}\)

Different versions of reductionism demand that hearers have different sorts of positive reasons. On some reductionist views, called global reductionist views, hearers must have non-testimonial based positive reasons for believing that testimony is in general reliable. In other words, hearers are justified in depending on testimony insofar as observation and experience have shown that testimony, for the most part, has conformed to reality. On other views, called local reductionist views, hearers must have non-testimonial based positive reasons for believing some particular testimony. These latter reductionist views are cashed out in terms of the testimonial track record of: a

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\(^{50}\) Adler (2002); Fricker (2006).


\(^{52}\) Lackey (2006, 160).
particular speaker; a particular type of testimony; a particular type of speaker; or a particular community of speakers. What is central to both types of reductionist views, global and local, is the idea that what is required for the transmission of testimonial warrant is positive evidence that the testimony is reliable (in some relevant class of cases).

Non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony centers on the basic *a priori* claim that hearers have defeasible epistemic entitlements to depend on testimony. Non-reductionists, including Robert Audi, Tyler Burge, C.A.J. Coady, and John McDowell, among others, hold that testimony is a unique, fundamentally basic—non-reductive—source of epistemic warrant, and that “an assertion is creditworthy until shown otherwise.” Non-reductionists hold that testimony is much like perception: just as perceivers can be immediately justified in believing what they see on the basis of their perceptions, so too can hearers can be immediately justified in believing what they hear on the basis on others’ testimony. As non-reductionist C.A.J. Coady puts it, “We can often take it that the testimony mechanism is functioning adequately, just as we may usually take it that the perceptual or memory mechanism is not malfunctioning.”

A wide variety of arguments have been put forth in support of non-reductionism. For example, it has been argued that non-reductionism best suits the phenomenology of dependence on testimony, that testimony, as a speech act, essentially consists of $S$

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53 Audi (1997); Burge (1993); Coady (1992); and McDowell (1994).

54 Adler (2012).


56 Ibid. (143-144).
offering $H$ an assurance that $p$ and taking responsibility for the truth of $p$, and $H$’s reason for dependence on testimony is grounded in $S$’s giving her word and so in the testimonial exchange itself;\textsuperscript{57} and that given that we trust in our own intellectual faculties and in our own beliefs, by parity we ought to presumptively trust in the beliefs, and so the testimony, of others.\textsuperscript{58}

Irrespective of the differences between these various flavors of non-reductionism, they all share a common central feature: in contrast to reductionist views that require positive evidence of reliability (e.g., of testimony generally, of a particular speaker, etc.), on these views hearers have default epistemic entitlements to depend on testimony.

Elizabeth Fricker puts the contrast between reductionism and non-reductionism as follows:

The solution [to the problem of justifying belief through testimony] can take either of two routes. It may be shows that the required step—from ‘$S$ asserted that $p$’ to ‘$p$’—can be made as a piece of inference involving only familiar deductive and inductive principles, applied to empirically established premises. Alternatively, it may be argued that the step is legitimized as the exercise of a special presumptive epistemic right to trust, not dependent on evidence.\textsuperscript{59}

Reductionists take the former route, while non-reductionists take the latter; they maintain that hearers have a defeasible epistemic entitlement to depend on testimony even in the absence of non-testimonially based reasons for belief (i.e., in the absence of reasons to believe that testimony is in general reliable, that a particular speaker is reliable, that a particular type of testimony is reliable, that a particular type of speaker is reliable, or that

\textsuperscript{57} Faulkner (2011); Hinchman (2005); McMyler (2011); Moran (2005); and Ross (1986).

\textsuperscript{58} Foley (2001).

\textsuperscript{59} Fricker (1994, 128).
a particular community of speakers is reliable). That is, non-reductionists reject the
*Positive Reasons Component* endorsed by reductionists.

These important differences notwithstanding, both reductionist and non-reductionist views share an important similarity. On both views, evidence of unreliability can override epistemic entitlements to depend on testimony, for such entitlements are defeasible. *H* has an epistemic right to depend on *S*’s say-so only so long as *H* does not have any undefeated defeaters.

What qualifies as a defeater? Lackey helpfully disambiguates three types, doxastic, normative, and factual:

**DOXASTIC DEFEATER**: a proposition *D* which is believed by *S* to be true, yet indicates that *S*’s belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained.

**NORMATIVE DEFEATER**: a proposition *D* which *S* is justified in believing to be true, yet which indicates that *S*’s belief that *p* is either false, or unreliably formed or sustained.

**FACTUAL DEFEATER**: a true proposition *D* such that if *D* were added to *S*’s belief system, then *S* would no longer be justified in believing that *p*. ⁶⁰

The clarification about defeaters is important, for sometimes, arguments against dependence on moral testimony may in fact simply indicate the presence of a defeater. For instance, one plausible way to interpret optimist Sliwa’s take on the badness of Eleanor’s depending on her friend’s testimony about the permissibility of eating meat in the *Vegetarianism* case is that Sliwa simply thinks that Eleanor has a normative defeater. The case states that Eleanor has “recently realized that [eating meat] raises some moral issues.” It is not a far stretch to think in coming to this realization Eleanor found the ethics of eating meat to be a matter about which “intelligent, well-informed and

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thoughtful people disagree.” If that is so, then there is some proposition D—roughly, that there is persistent disagreement amongst reasonable people about whether or not it is permissible to eat meat—which Eleanor is justified in believing to be true (even if she does not in fact believe it to be true), that indicates that her testimonially-based belief that eating meat is wrong was unreliably formed.

Now, imagine that Eleanor knows that her friend is in a new relationship and further, that she knows that her friend tends to be overly deferential in such relationships: her friend has the unfortunate habit of subsuming her own beliefs and preferences in favor of her romantic partners’ tastes, beliefs and values, particularly early on in relationships. Prior to entering the new relationship, Eleanor’s friend was not a vegetarian, but shortly after beginning to date her new partner—who is a vegan—Eleanor became a strict vegetarian. If Eleanor believes in light of this that her friend’s beliefs about the wrongness of eating meat are grounded in her idiosyncratic relationship tendencies rather than her appreciation of the reasons in favor of vegetarianism, then Eleanor has a doxastic defeater for depending on her friend’s testimony. Eleanor believes a proposition—namely, that her friend’s views about the ethics of vegetarianism are principally informed by her romantic desires and habits—which indicates that if she were to believe that eating meat is wrong on her friend’s say-so, that belief would be unreliably formed since, at least according to Eleanor, her friend’s belief lacks appropriate justification. Even if Eleanor does not believe that her friend’s views about vegetarianism stem from her romantic inclinations, but it is nevertheless true that they do, then Eleanor has a factual defeater for depending on her friend’s testimony.

Optimists can readily allow, then, that just as hearers of non-moral testimony
sometimes have undefeated defeaters, so too do hearers of moral testimony. Recall that on reductionist views of testimonial epistemic warrant, both global and local, hearers must have evidence that testimony is reliable (that is, hearers must satisfy a *Positive Reasons Component*). But, in contrast, non-reductionists hold that hearers have default epistemic entitlements to depend on testimony. For non-reductionists to be susceptible to epistemic pessimists’ views, epistemic pessimists must show that hearers’ default epistemic entitlements are defeased in wholesale fashion—that is, they must show that hearers of moral testimony have undefeated defeaters across the board.

### 2.2 Moral Testimony and Epistemic Entitlement

We can readily see that it is not crucial to either the conception of a ‘*Positive Reasons Component*’ or the conception of ‘defeaters,’ as explained above, whether the content of testimony is moral or non-moral. Further, reductionists and non-reductionists, in spelling out the details of their views more fully, do not make any claims about the content of testimony. So, on both reductionist and non-reductionist views, the transmission of testimonial warrant does not hinge on whether the content of testimony is moral or non-moral. As Lackey puts it,

> There are no reasons, either from the literature specifically on testimony or from that concerning general epistemological issues, for regarding the subject matter of the testimony as relevant to its epistemology. If the speaker’s testimony satisfies the central requirement—for example, it is reliable, virtuously produced, tracks the truth, and so on—and the hearer does not have any relevant defeaters, its content does not matter epistemologically.\(^{61}\)

\(^{61}\)Lackey (2013, 31).
On their face, then, if these views of testimonial warrant are successful in explaining how non-moral testimony confers warrant, then they are successful in explaining how moral testimony confers warrant. Without further reason to think that evidence of reliability is unavailable when it comes to moral testimony or that hearers of moral testimony have undefeated defeaters across the board, reductionism and non-reductionism support the idea that there is no general difference between the transmission of epistemic warrant by moral and non-moral testimony.

This provides a *prima facie* defense of the No Difference Thesis. To challenge this defense, those who endorse epistemic pessimism owe us an argument for the asymmetry thesis that shows that when it comes to moral matters, evidence of the reliability of testimony is unavailable or hearers invariably have undefeated defeaters. In the next section I examine five such arguments.

3. **Objections to the No Difference Thesis**

In this section I will consider five versions of epistemic pessimism that threaten to undermine the No Difference Thesis.

3.1 **Hopkins’s Disagreement Worry**

Above I set aside appeals to disagreement that are intended to show the impossibility of moral knowledge generally. We might still wonder, however, if there is a special problem about dependence on moral testimony posed by moral disagreement beyond that which makes it hard, or even practically impossible, to get moral knowledge generally. That is
one way we might read the following passage from Robert Hopkins:

Testimony requires reliable informants. But morality is a topic for which reliable informants are hard to find. There is simply too much disagreement on moral issues for one to be entitled to assume that any informant is reliable. This lack of consensus is in part due to the perversion of judgment through interest; and in part to the fact that even the disinterested do just disagree more in evaluative matters than in factual ones. Whatever its source, it is sufficiently prevalent to undermine one’s confidence in others as moral informants. Hence one cannot legitimately rely on their testimony.  

Here the worry is not that moral disagreement undermines all of moral knowledge, just moral knowledge by way of moral testimony. In the face of moral disagreement, it might be that you can know some moral proposition so long as your knowledge of that proposition is undergirded by your own, independent appreciation of the reasons that the proposition holds true, but you cannot know that same proposition if you believe it by depending on testimony. While disagreement inhibits our ability to reliably identify reliable moral testifiers, thereby undermining the transmission of epistemic warrant by moral testimony, it does not necessarily undermine our confidence in our own moral judgments. Support for this line of thinking can be found in the literature on the epistemic significance of disagreement: some philosophers have argued that even when we know that other, well-informed, reasonable people disagree with us (our “epistemic peers”, as they are called in the literature), our confidence in the first-order reasons that support our judgments need not be swamped by our awareness of such disagreement.

I grant that this sort of worry poses a direct problem for the possibility of testimonial moral knowledge. Nevertheless I will argue that it is unsuccessful for three

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63 See, for example, Kelly (2005)
reasons: first, because it does not bottom out, so to speak, as a worry about moral
disagreement; second, because many cases of dependence on moral testimony are not
fundamentally subject to sustained moral disagreement; and third, because the worry
threatens to collapse into a worry about the possibility of moral knowledge, generally,
even though it does not bill itself in this way.

Non-moral disagreement is prevalent, and yet it is not taken to undermine the
transmission of epistemic warrant by non-moral testimony. Consider Michael Huemer’s
list of some non-moral questions over which there is extensive disagreement: Who shot
JFK? How should quantum mechanics be interpreted? What are the actual practices of
other cultures? What are the economic effects of government social programs? What
religion, if any, is correct? Are there paranormal phenomena? What causes illness?\footnote{Huemer (2006, 134-135).}
Even in light of extensive disagreement over these questions, we still are comfortable
saying that there are reliable testifiers in the fields of history, physics, anthropology,
economics, religion, cosmology, and epidemiology. In these cases we do not take the
mere fact of disagreement to undermine our ability to reliably pick out reliable testifiers,
but rather we take it as a reminder to be careful in choosing on whose testimony we
depend and to be critical in our dependence on the testimony of others. Epistemic
pessimists owe us an explanation, then, of why the same strategies we use to navigate
non-moral disagreement and carefully pick out non-moral testifiers will not work in cases
of dependence on moral testimony. To simply point to pervasive moral disagreement in
the absence of such an explanation is to give a wholly unsatisfactory explanation of the
asymmetry thesis. For such an explanation “does not support an asymmetry between
[moral] testimonial beliefs and all other testimonial beliefs. Rather, it supports an asymmetry between testimonial beliefs where there is a substantial amount of disagreement and those where there is not.”

As far as I know, Sarah McGrath offers the only explicit explanation given in the moral testimony literature of why we cannot use the same strategies to navigate moral disagreement and identify reliable moral testifiers that we use to navigate non-moral disagreement and identify reliable non-moral testifiers. She writes:

Certain scientific questions might be highly controversial among the population as a whole, but when a consensus or near consensus exists among those with the relevant expertise, one need remain in a state of agnosticism only for as long as it takes to discover the content of the consensus. It might be thought that there is a parallel defense of one’s controversial moral beliefs…In general, identifying those with genuine expertise in some domain will be most straightforward when we have some kind of independent check, one not itself subject to significant controversy, by which we can tell who is (and who is not) getting things right… But significantly, we possess no… independent check for moral expertise.

The crux of McGrath’s worry is not about moral disagreement full stop, but about the lack of an “independent check” that enables us to navigate such disagreement. Such a worry is clearly germane to a debate about testimonial moral knowledge, and so I attend to it below. But it is misleading to suggest that the worry is ultimately about moral disagreement, full stop; when adequately spelled out, it is ultimately a worry about our abilities to reliably pick out reliable testifiers when it comes to moral matters in the face of such disagreement.

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65 Lackey (2013, 46). In this passage, Lackey is concerned with aesthetic testimony, but her point holds, mutatis mutandis, for moral testimony.

Additionally, recall from above that optimists like Sliwa can grant that disagreement might sometimes render dependence on moral testimony problematic. They can concede this and still point to the many cases of dependence on moral testimony in which moral disagreement is not really at issue. Presumably anti-racist norms are not subject to deep disagreement, at least amongst the morally mature. If I am committed to anti-racist norms, but I am just really very bad at seeing when these norms apply and so depend on the testimony of my friends to pick out instances of racism, even blatant racism, the matters for which I depend are not subject to deep moral disagreement (again, at least among the morally mature). Furthermore, the fundamental reason that I depend on my friends’ moral testimony is not because I take them to be adept at navigating moral disagreement, but because I think they have more well-developed moral sensitivities than I do. That is, the worry about moral disagreement does not cover all cases in which dependence on moral testimony is at issue; in some cases it is principally a matter of thinking that some people have competence in some area that others lack.

Furthermore, the worry about moral disagreement does not just impugn dependence on moral testimony, but also paves the way for moral skepticism, more generally. As Hopkins argues, “[N]ot just unwillingness to believe what one is told, but reluctance to form moral beliefs by any means at all” follows shortly on the heels of a defense of this worry.\textsuperscript{67} For if disagreement is such that it utterly undermines our trust in testifiers, it seems that it also threatens to undermine our own moral judgments. If we lack the resources to reliably adjudicate moral disagreements amongst others, and so lack the resources to reliably identify moral testifiers, then what resources do we have to

\textsuperscript{67} Hopkins (2007, 621).
adjudicate moral disagreements between others and ourselves and so maintain our confidence that we are right in the face of these disagreements? If the worry ultimately collapses into a worry about the possibility of moral knowledge, generally, then as I point out above, it is not directly relevant to the ongoing debate about dependence on moral testimony.

3.2 McGrath’s Calibration Worry

McGrath offers the following argument for the asymmetry thesis:

When one observes that it is raining, one in effect has independent access, via perception, to facts in the target domain. In arriving at the view that a given weather-forecaster correctly predicted rain, one does not rely on techniques similar to those employed in arriving at that prediction. Because one is in a position to determine reliably which weather-forecasters got it right on particular occasions by some method other than those employed by the weather-forecasters themselves, one has a way of calibrating their techniques for accuracy… By contrast, there seems to be no analogous way to calibrate the accuracy or reliability of someone’s moral judgment, because one lacks the relevant kind of independent access to the moral facts. If one attempted to rank others with respect to the accuracy of their moral judgment by checking how often they answered controversial moral questions correctly, it seems as though one could do so only by engaging in first-order moral reasoning and deliberation of one’s own. It is thus unsurprising that clear and unequivocal evidence that someone possess unusually reliable moral judgment is hard to come by.  

McGrath’s worry is that hearers’ lack “independent access” to the moral facts and so cannot reliably identify reliable moral testifiers. The reason that moral testimony fails to transmit epistemic warrant in the ways that non-moral testimony does is that when it comes to moral, but not non-moral, matters, we lack an “independent check, one not itself subject to significant controversy, by which we can tell who is (and who is not) getting

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things right.” On McGrath’s view, independent checks are necessary to ensure the reliability of testimony, but they are not available in the realm of morality.

What, more precisely, is an independent check? While McGrath does not give a concise definition, she does give a number of examples to illustrate the concept. In the passage above, she suggests that our direct sense perception provides an independent check on weather-forecasting methods: we can independently check who is a more reliable weather-forecaster by using our sense perception to determine whose predictions are more often accurate. She also argues that we can independently check the reliability of our long-distance vision by examining objects at a distance, and then examining those very same objects up close. And, she says, we can independently check whether MIT provides good training for structural engineers by examining the stability of bridges built by structural engineers trained at MIT. The basic idea at work in all of these examples seems to be that independent checks employ methods different than the methods used to arrive at the judgments being checked, and are themselves not subject to significant controversy. And so we can see why McGrath aptly labels her worry the calibration worry: to calibrate an instrument (the so-called “system under test”) we compare that instrument’s deliverances to the deliverances of another instrument (the so-called “standard system”) that we know to be reliable. When it comes to morality, to get an independent check on the reliability of some judgment one would not engage in first-
order moral deliberation, but would use some independent, non-controversial method to acquire evidence that the judgment was reliably formed.

It might seem, at first glance, that McGrath’s calibration worry is particularly relevant for those who endorse a reductionist view of the epistemology of testimony. According to McGrath, the lack of an independent check impedes us from getting positive evidence of reliability, and reductionists, but not non-reductionists, require such evidence as a condition of testimonial epistemic warrant. But we can cash out McGrath’s worry as a normative defeater: Let me explain.

Assuming McGrath is right, we are in general unable to tell apart reliable and unreliable moral testifiers because we do not have the means to independently check their testimony. This fact alone is not enough for the calibration worry to gain traction with non-reductionists. But consider what non-reductionist Coady writes of testimony: “We do not have to establish the many propositions which, if false, would invalidate our ready assent to what we are told, unless there is already some reason to believe that their truth is in jeopardy.” So, on non-reductionist views, we do not have to establish the reliability of testifiers, unless we have reason to believe that their reliability “is in jeopardy.” When it comes to moral testimony, we have such reason: we know (or at least should know) that many people, including the people on whose moral testimony we might depend, are bad, even terribly bad, at making moral judgments. It looks like, then, if we are non-negligibly liable to depend on unreliable testifiers and we have no recourse

72 We might also be able to cash out McGrath’s worry as a doxastic defeater, depending on the specifics of the case in question and, more specifically, what the hearer’s other beliefs are.

for monitoring testifiers’ reliability, we are justified in believing that our beliefs based on moral testimony are unreliably formed—that is, we have a normative defeater for dependence on moral testimony. Consider an analogy with memory, widely considered a basic source of epistemic warrant: imagine that you somehow accumulate a wealth of evidence that you often grossly misremember, but your situation is such that you have no means for determining whether you have misremembered or the conditions under which you are most prone to misremembering. It is reasonable to think that in such a case there is a proposition which you are justified in believing to be true, i.e., that your memory often leads you astray, that indicates that your memory-based beliefs are unreliably formed. Your have a normative defeater for your memory-based beliefs. Returning to testimony, the issue for non-reductionists, assuming that McGrath is correct, is not that hearers’ lack positive evidence of testifiers’ reliability, but that hearers, in depending on moral testimony, have reason to believe that they are forming their beliefs in unreliable fashion.74

So McGrath’s worry poses a problem for dependence on moral testimony regardless of which view of testimonial warrant one espouses. But let me suggest that McGrath’s worry is, at least on one front, overblown. McGrath suggests that the challenge of identifying reliable moral testifiers is the challenge of finding someone who consistently arrives at the correct moral answers to non-trivial moral questions…or at least, someone whose reliability with respect to such questions significantly exceeds that possessed by the average

74 Some non-reductionists, such as Faulkner (2006), deny that a belief must be reliably formed in order to count as knowledge: “An audience can acquire knowledge that p [from testimony] even if they reached the belief that p by an unreliable method and possess no evidence for p” (157). For such non-reductionists, it is hard to see how McGrath’s worry, and indeed the next two worries considered, would get traction, although such a view certainly faces other challenges.
person, when the average person does not form his moral opinions by deferring.\textsuperscript{75}

But this is too high a bar. Individuals can be reliable about some moral matters but not others. Recall Karen Jones’ Peter:

\texttt{PETER: Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of sexism and racism… Such blindness can sometimes indicate insincerity, but in Peter’s case it did not… He could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’ applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to non-egregious new cases.}\textsuperscript{76}

We can imagine that Peter, while very bad at picking out instances of sexism and racism, is wonderfully adept at navigating norms of rudeness, for example. As Jones puts it, there can be local relative epistemic advantages. However, McGrath seems to suggest that we must, in order to be justified in depending on moral testimony, have evidence that the testifier is global in her epistemic advantages.\textsuperscript{77} Imagine if we applied this same standard in non-moral contexts; it would impugn what strike many of us as utterly uncontroversial cases of dependence on non-moral testimony. I know quite a bit about moral philosophy, but very little about the philosophy of time, for example. I know a lot about the rules of basketball, but almost nothing about the rules of soccer. And even though I know a lot about the rules of basketball, I know hardly anything about current NBA teams and players. That I do not know much about the philosophy of time, or soccer, or the NBA does not undermine my reliability as a testifier when it comes to moral philosophy and

\textsuperscript{75} McGrath (2007, 97).

\textsuperscript{76} Jones (1999, 59-60).

\textsuperscript{77} I borrow the local/global distinction from Jones (1999).
the rules of basketball, though. Similarly, that Peter is bad at picking out instances of sexism and racism does not undermine his reliability as a testifier when it comes to matters concerning norms of rudeness.

While my point above mitigates McGrath’s worry, it does not resolve it; even once we lower the bar, so to speak, the calibration worry resurfaces. For example, even if we grant that Peter may be reliable when it comes to applying norms surrounding rudeness but unreliable when it comes to applying norms surrounding sexism and racism, there still remains a worry about how we could come to know that Peter is reliably getting it right with respect to rudeness. On McGrath’s view, we would still need an independent check for the reliability of Peter’s judgments concerning rudeness, and such a check is not available to us. In what follows, I will argue that we do have independent checks when it comes to morality. More importantly, I will argue that, even so, the requirement that we have independent checks in order to assess others’ reliability is, in general, a bad one.

Hearers often have the ability to assess the reliability of moral testifiers by some independent check, i.e., by means other than engaging in first-order moral deliberations regarding the content of the testimony. Consider, for example, the following: imagine that someone testifies to you about some moral questions surrounding the demands of friendship and concludes her testimony by informing you that these are the words she herself lives by. Now imagine that you happen to know that this person has systematically tanked friendships and is widely and vehemently disliked by others. In such a case, it is plausible to think that you have reason to doubt the reliability of her moral testimony, even without engaging in first-order deliberations about its content. Of
course I am not suggesting that there is a necessary connection between making accurate moral judgments about friendship and having flourishing friendships. It is possible, for example, that the testifier in this case just has had the very bad luck of being surrounded by an unfriendly lot. But if somehow you were to find out that in fact that the testifier has been subject to such misfortune, it would not mean that you did not initially have grounds for doubting her testimony, it would just mean that your grounds were undercut.

So hearers can independently check the reliability of moral testimony. Nevertheless, I do not think that requiring “independent access” to the facts should be a requirement for calibrating the accuracy of moral or non-moral testimony, for it strikes me that general philosophical skepticism looms near such a requirement. Consider a mundane non-moral example: imagine that you and I attended a party together last weekend. Earlier today, you recounted to me how nice it was to run into one of our mutual acquaintances, Tom, at the gathering. At first, not immediately remembering seeing Tom at the party, I was confused by what you said. But after a few moments I correctly recalled the pleasant encounter with Tom. It strikes me that my remembering seeing Tom at the party does speak to the reliability of your memory (assuming I do not have a tendency to falsely remember things, etc.)—even though the “check” I employ relies on the same source, namely memory.

Sometimes we check the reliability of judgments using the very faculties or methods used to form those judgments. If we deny that this is appropriate method of checking our judgments, and demand independent checks, then we threaten to undermine justification in many non-moral contexts as well moral contexts. As Huemer points out, it is very difficult to see how one might check the reliability of introspection, memory,
inductive reasoning, and reasoning in general, without relying on introspection, memory, inductive reasoning, and reasoning, respectively.\textsuperscript{78} What is more, we have reason to think that even McGrath’s own example of a supposedly paradigmatic independent check is not independent in the sense that she outlines. McGrath takes immediate sense perception to provide an independent check on methods of weather forecasting. She writes, “In arriving at the view that a given weather-forecaster correctly predicted rain, one does not rely on techniques similar to those employed in arriving at the prediction.”\textsuperscript{79} However, weather-forecasting methods and models themselves depend, in large part, on historical data accumulated by sense perception.

3.3 \textit{LaBarge and Cholbi’s Credentials Worry}

So the requirement of an independent check is a bad one. With non-moral testimony we often use the same methods to check the reliability of the testimony as the testifiers themselves used. However, Scott LaBarge and Michael Cholbi argue that this is a strategy not readily available, if at all, to hearers of moral testimony. They defend the asymmetry thesis by arguing that when it comes to moral matters, as opposed to non-moral matters, hearers are not well-positioned to engage in first-order deliberations in order to assess the content of testimony. They have termed this worry the “credentials problem.” Unlike the calibration worry that emphasizes hearers’ lack of an “independent check,” the credentials problem centers on the idea that even if we abandon a requirement of an independent check hearers are still not able to distinguish reliable and unreliable

\textsuperscript{78} Huemer (2008, 108-109).

\textsuperscript{79} McGrath (2011, 127).
moral testimony by way of first-order moral deliberations. LaBarge and Cholbi’s idea, most basically, is that if hearers’ could reliably assess the content of moral testimony, then dependence on moral testimony would be otiose. But for those sincerely in a position to depend on moral testimony, they are in “no position to appraise the content” of the testimony because, for them, “the shape of a successful solution to our moral problems” is usually far from obvious.  

Like the previous objection to the No Difference Thesis, the credentials problem is worrisome for reductionists, who are also optimists about moral testimony, because if it holds true then it frustrates hearers’ abilities to satisfy the Positive Reasons Component. It is problematic for both reductionists and non-reductionists because it would undermine both views’ requirement that hearers of moral testimony have no undefeated defeaters; if hearers are indeed unable to reliability identify reliable moral testifiers and if they lack abilities to assess the content of moral testimony, and if they know that moral testimony is often false, then hearers are justified in believing that beliefs based on moral testimony are, to borrow Coady’s words, “in jeopardy.”

You might think that a hearer, in order to be justified in depending on moral testimony, need not be able to assess the content of the testimony because she can have evidence of its credibility if she justifiably believes that that the testifier is reliable. There are numerous and varied ways to distinguish reliable from unreliable moral testifiers that do not involve engaging in first-order moral reasoning about the particular proposition being testified to. As Sliwa points out,

Maybe you have seen the person make good moral judgments before and you know that they have thought about the issue at hand. Or maybe they

have been recommended to you as a good advisor by someone whose judgment you trust. Maybe you have asked them some related moral questions and seen that they give reasonable answers.\footnote{81 Sliwa (2012, 191).}

So, even if a hearer is not a position to tell whether a testifier is right about the particular matter at hand because, to borrow Cholbi’s words, she does not know what “the shape of a successful solution” will look like, the hearer might very well still have reason to depend on the testifier because she justifiably believes that the testifier is reliable. Such a line of thinking suggests an indirect solution to the credentials problem, in that it appeals to second order considerations (about the reliability of the testifier) rather than first-order moral deliberations about the particular proposition to resolve the problem. But Cholbi argues that an indirect solution is not available to those in a position to sincerely depend on moral testimony because, just as they lack the sense of the “shape of a successful solution” to the moral issue at hand, so too do they lack an ability to distinguish reliable and unreliable moral testifiers.

For the sake of argument, let us grant Cholbi’s (and McGrath’s) point that we are unable to reliably identify reliable moral testifiers, in order that we may address in its strongest form his further claim that we lack the abilities to evaluate the content of moral testimony. Even granting that an indirect solution to the credentials problem is unavailable to hearers of moral testimony (because they lack the abilities to distinguish reliable and unreliable moral testifiers), I will argue that it is implausible to say that those in a position to sincerely depend on moral testimony are unable to assess the content of that testimony.
When we depend on moral testimony, at least as mature moral agents, presumably we do so against a backdrop of an extensive network of moral beliefs and capabilities. So, when we depend on moral testimony we may very well have a well-developed sense of the “shape of a successful solution” to some moral problem. For example, the topic of three-person IVF has been getting quite a lot of press lately, on the heels of its approval in the UK’s House of Commons and House of Lords. I have seen the headlines, but I have not had time to explore the issue in any depth, and so I have no idea what stance I, personally, would take on the issue. But because I have had the opportunity to think through some other, related reproductive issues more carefully, I have many justified beliefs that would help me to assess the content of moral testimony about three-person IVF. For instance, I believe that the issue is complex, that individuals’ rights to procreative liberty are at stake, and yet that there are other procreative options available to individuals interested in three-person IVF. Against my network of background beliefs I could, out of hand, dismiss all sorts of moral testimony about three-person IVF. I could, for example, dismiss the testimony of those who testify that three-person IVF is absolutely immoral because it involves “unnatural” interventions.

This is quite in contrast to Cholbi’s depictions of what it looks like to depend on moral testimony. In arguing that hearers lack the ability to assess the content of moral testimony, Cholbi goes so far as to caution: “An unapologetic racist could offer moral [testimony] based on his racist paradigm, and the [testimony] could seem as coherent as that provided by another [testifier].”82 But mature moral agents, even Peter—who could, after all, “could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism”—can readily dismiss the

82 Cholbi (2007, 332).
moral testimony of Cholbi’s coherent racist, because even if they do not know the answers to complex moral issues surrounding race, they can know that racism is morally untenable.

One might worry at this point that, by bolstering the sense of the “shape of a successful solution,” I am only offering up a defense of a relatively weak form of dependence. I admit that the more one has such a sense, the weaker his dependence is. Still, having a relatively robust sense of the shape of a successful solution to a moral question or problem is compatible with a pretty high degree of dependence, even if it is less strong than the dependence would be if one had absolutely no idea what a successful solution to the matter at hand looked like.

To see this consider a simple non-moral example: Someone tells John that the Sears tower has 108 stories. Prior to being told that, John had absolutely no beliefs about the particular number of floors in the Sears Tower, but based on the testimony John comes to believe that the Sears Tower does in fact have 108 floors. Had the testifier said that the Sears tower has 1000, or 20, or 300, or 50 floors, John would have immediately dismissed her testimony. So John has a rather robust sense of the shape of a successful solution to the question of how many floors there are in the Sears Tower; for example, he has a sense of what would count as clear error. Still, if somehow John found out that he had misheard the testifier—that the testifier in fact said that there are 118 floors—we can imagine that John would no longer believe that the Sears Tower has 108 floors, and instead he would come to believe, on the basis of the testimony, that it has 118 floors. That is, even though John has a well-developed sense of the shape of a successful solution to the question of how many floors there are in the Sears Tower, John’s belief
about the particular height of the Sears Tower still crucially hinges on the testimony in question. Dependence on testimony—moral and non-moral—is, after all, almost never in a vacuum. We have a large set of background non-moral beliefs views that inform and limit the sort of non-moral testimony that we take seriously and depend upon. And the same is true of moral testimony. But even so, that does not preclude our dependence on testimony being so strong as to make all the difference between belief and disbelief.

I think Cholbi overlooks hearers’ abilities to assess the content of moral testimony, in part, because he fails to disambiguate the varieties of dependence on moral testimony set forth in Chapter I. He writes,

> What the non-expert seeks from the moral expert is not technical or instrumental advice about how to pursue this or that moral end (though that may be part of the moral expert’s expertise as well). The advice seeker does not want to know how to go about implementing some moral judgment, but instead wants to know what sorts of judgments to make. The goodness of a genuine expert’s moral advice would thus not be exhausted by what the expert knows about how to realize particular ends or values. In the terms articulated earlier, the non-expert wants to know what shape the proper resolution ought to take and therefore seeks a determination of which reasons, and hence which ends or values, are decisive in particular complex moral situations.\(^83\)

But “how to go about implementing some moral judgment” was precisely what Peter was after when he turned to other co-op members for their moral testimony. The case explicitly states that Peter was committed to norms against racism and sexism, so we can imagine that Peter believed that the values expressed by those norms should be decisive in picking out new co-op members. The case also states that while Peter could pick out obvious violations of these norms, he struggled to pick out more subtle violations. And so, in turning to his fellow co-op members, Peter was in fact just looking for “instrumental advice about how to pursue this or that moral end.”

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83 Ibid.
In Chapter I, I also suggested that we should see the WEDDING TESTIMONY case in the same light.

WEDDING TESTIMONY: 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. They decide to ask a friend. She tells them that it’s permissible to ask the wealthier family for a greater contribution, and Tom and Sara, knowing that she’s normally trustworthy and reliable, believe her.

We can imagine that Tom and Sara are sensitive to the main moral considerations in play (they can see that norms of fairness are at stake), but they are just unsure about how to weigh those considerations. Sometimes we, like Peter and like Tom and Sara, depend on testimony not because we are unsure about which values are at stake or which ends are worth pursuing, but precisely because we are unsure of how to live out existing moral commitments.

Another means for gathering evidence about moral testifiers’ reliability using first-order moral deliberations, I have earlier suggested, is by looking retrospectively at testifiers’ track records. Cholbi, however, contends that we cannot do so; he writes,

> Whether, for instance, an individual who claims to be an expert in investing money is an expert could be judged straightforwardly by the profitability of the investment plans she recommends. In contrast, there does not seem to be any straightforward basis on which one could, even retrospectively, appraise the advice of a…moral [testifier].

Contra Cholbi, one’s reliability as a moral testifier can be post hoc verifiable. This can happen in various ways. For example, one reason that hearers might depend on moral testimony is that figuring out moral matters on one’s own can be quite taxing. Perhaps in

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84 Ibid. (325). Emphasis added.
Wedding Testimony

Tom and Sara turn to their friend because they are concerned about their own abilities to make a sound judgment about what to do given that they are both emotionally and physically exhausted from planning a large-scale wedding while holding down full-time careers, attending to their partnership, seeing friends, etc. In light of this, Tom and Sara rather unquestioningly depend on their friend’s moral testimony. Now imagine that after the excitement of the wedding has come and gone, Sara has the opportunity to sit down with her and Tom’s friend, who takes the time to explain why she thought it was permissible to ask Tom’s family for a greater contribution. Sara, now much less stressed and much more clearheaded, carefully considers her friend’s explanation and finds it thoroughly convincing. Sara’s own deliberations on the matter speak to the reliability of her friend’s judgment. Consider a non-moral analogy: imagine that you put a long proof up on the board and tell me that it is valid, but at the time I am unable to work it out on my own, so I just depend on your testimony. If I return later and work the proof through and determine on my own that it is indeed valid, then my own deliberations are evidence of the reliability of your judgment.

Alternatively, it might be that the very act of $H$ depending on $S$’s moral testimony puts $H$ in a position to check the accuracy of $S$’s testimony—a point I will be returning to in full force in Chapter III. The point, in brief, is that sometimes it is our dependence on moral testimony that puts us in a position to figure out what is right and why it is right. Peter is unable to pick out instances of sexism and racism, but we can imagine that by depending on the moral testimony of other, more reliable, co-op members, he could over time develop his capacities for applying the norms, i.e., norms against sexism and racism, to which he is committed. After developing his capacities in this way, we can imagine
that Peter would then be able to see, by his own lights, how the people on whose moral testimony he had depended had accurately identified cases of sexism and racism. The poet Ralph Hodgson captures the spirit of this point when he writes: “Some things have to be believed to be seen.”

3.4  *Driver’s Transmission Worry*

Driver, like McGrath, LaBarge, and Cholbi, expresses concern about hearers’ abilities to reliably identify reliable moral testifiers. She writes,

> Someone may possess the disinterest, or impartiality, etc., required to arrive at reliably true moral judgments, but lack the impartiality to deliver those judgments…To accept [one’s moral testimony] I must not only have confidence in his judgment, but confidence in the impartial transmission on the judgment, and this may be harder to achieve in cases involving moral judgments.\(^8^6\)

According to Driver, worries about identifying reliable moral testifiers are compounded by worries about how their judgments get communicated. Even if one is confident that a testifier makes reliable moral judgments, one might lack confidence in that same testifier’s ability or intentions to reliably convey those moral judgments via testimony.

Consider Driver’s striking illustration of this point:

> Satan could well be an example of a being with superior moral knowledge, but it would be unwise to defer to Satan’s judgment on what to do. I might be confident in his ability to know, but not confident in his accurate transmission of that knowledge, because I view him to be deceitful.\(^8^7\)

\(^8^5\) Hodgson (1959).

\(^8^6\) Driver (2006, 632).

\(^8^7\) Ibid. (630).
To give a more mundane illustration of the point: any dedicated teacher knows that there are all sorts of skills and strategies that one must build up in order to effectively and accurately communicate; it is not enough to simply know your material inside and out.

On Driver’s view, then, there are two “levels” on which we need to assess the reliability of a moral testifier in order for our dependence on her testimony to be sound: first, we need to be confident that she can arrive at correct moral judgments; second, we need to be confident in her ability to provide us with those judgments by her testimony. In the preceding subsections I have already laid out numerous ways that we might acquire evidence of a testifier’s reliability in making moral judgments, so here I will focus on what is unique to Driver’s worry: her contention that is particularly difficult to come by confidence in a moral testifier’s ability to effectively and accurately transmit the content of her moral judgments.

Driver spells out her worry within a framework that assumes a reductionist view of testimonial epistemic warrant. Driver writes,

Edward Craig notes that being a good informant… ‘means more than just being right; it addition to that the good informant must possess some characteristic that make him recognizable as such and supports confidence in his information.’ To know on the basis of what the informant says is to be cognizant of this extra condition or characteristic.88

According to Driver, the characteristics that make others’ recognizable as reliable informants—the markers of reliable moral testifiers—include experience, reasonableness, impartiality, and confirmation in judgment. In order to be justified in depending on moral testimony, hearers must be “cognizant” that testifiers satisfy some or all of these characteristics, which is to say that hearers must satisfy a reductionist Positive Reasons

88 Ibid. (634). Emphasis added.
Component. But Driver’s main point can be made without assuming reductionism in the epistemology of testimony. If hearers are in general unable to assess whether or not some moral testifier is a reliable transmitter of moral judgments, then, as with the preceding worries, hearers of moral testimony have a normative defeater.

But Driver’s worry is ultimately untenable, as it does not support the asymmetry thesis. As I will argue, it draws attention to challenges in identifying reliable testifiers that crop up in moral and non-moral contexts.

Driver does not herself offer an explicit explanation as to why confidence in the reliability of the transmission of testimony is harder to achieve in moral, rather than non-moral, contexts. Consider Driver’s own central illustration of how making accurate judgments and reliably testifying can come apart:

Perhaps parents are better knowers with respect to their children precisely because they lack impartiality with respect to their children. But note that in transmitting knowledge one may quite justifiably be skeptical of what a parent says about a child, precisely because of the lack of impartiality.89

Most plausibly, the content of what parents say about their children is at times moral (as when one parent tells another that her child is exceedingly conscientious and kind-hearted) and at time non-moral (as when a parent tells another that her child is a precocious reader), and at times both. So even Driver’s own example fails to explain the asymmetry thesis. What is more, her example shows how bias infects the transmission of moral and non-moral testimony by providing an illustration of how transmission worries can crop up in non-moral contexts as well as moral contexts.

To be charitable, other parts of Driver’s paper are suggestive of one possible explanation that she might have had in mind in claiming that confidence in reliable

89 Ibid. (631).
transmission might be, to quote her, “harder to achieve in cases involving moral judgments.” In those parts, Driver explores the ways in which moral experience can affect moral judgment. She notes,

Though the importance of experience in privileging moral judgment has been noted in the literature, it is surprising to note little discussion of the various ways in which experience can distort one’s perceptions and lead to a loss of knowledge or failure to know.⁹⁰

Here, Driver suggests that moral experience is a double-edged sword. It might sometimes uniquely position one to gain moral knowledge and develop moral understanding,⁹¹ but it also might sometimes block moral knowledge and understanding. As she notes, “The psychology literature, for example, is rife with examples of various fallacies people are prone to—hasty generalization, for example, which a single negative or positive experience takes on exaggerated significance.”⁹² Driver’s thought might be that when it comes to the transmission of moral judgments, moral experience can similarly prove a hindrance. Imagine, for example, someone whose own moral experiences have bolstered her abilities of moral discernment regarding gender and equity, and have provided grounds, in part, for her reliable moral judgments concerning sexism. We can imagine that those same moral experiences might, at least in some contexts, play a distorting role in the transmission of her moral judgments. Her own experiences of sexist discrimination, for example, might at times lead her to downplay the nature and extent of her concerns about sexism. Perhaps Driver’s worry, more fully spelled out, is that when experience

⁹⁰ Ibid. (628).

⁹¹ Driver appears to acknowledge this when she writes, “In the moral realm, then, one might give greater weight to the view of someone who has experienced both freedom and repression regarding… which is to be morally supported or promoted” (Ibid).

⁹² Ibid. (629).
undergirds a testifier’s moral judgment, it should make us wary of the reliability of the testifier’s transmission of that judgment.

But this explanation, though offering a salutary warning about potential pitfalls in dependence on moral testimony, of course does not give a general reason to distrust moral testimony. For one, not all moral testimony is based on moral experience. For example, a friend of mine recently patronized a local restaurant that served drinks in glassware which featured images of the Washington, D.C. NFL mascot. She told the manager of the restaurant, “The Washington football team name and logo are racist and deeply derogatory.” My friend has professionally and personally thought very carefully about this and related issues; she is also relatively affluent white woman and her testimony was not significantly based on her own personal moral experiences.

Or, sometimes moral testimony is based on personal moral experience, but not in such a way that it is likely to play a distorting role in the transmission of one’s moral judgments. Consider the following example:

**Rude Email:** Anna shares the social norm against rudeness and she is trying hard to be polite, but she cannot always tell whether her tone of voice, her behavior or an email she is writing is rude. She worries about this because she doesn’t want to be rude. Therefore, whenever she is uncertain, she relies on her friend’s judgment.\(^{93}\)

We can imagine that her friend’s moral sensitivities to issues surrounding the norm against rudeness have been built up out of personal moral experiences (times she has been treated well, times she has been treated rudely, and the like). But we can also imagine that these experiences have been relatively low stakes, so to speak; Anna’s friend has never been dehumanized, orbullied, or profoundly alienated, she has just

\(^{93}\) Sliwa (2012, 180).
encountered a sampling of the mundane instances of rudeness (e.g., someone failing to hold the elevator door, being asked a personal question in public, being talked to curtly by a stranger, etc.) and civility that many of us encounter in our everyday lives. So we can imagine that her personal moral experiences have played a large part in Anna’s friend adeptness at applying the norm against rudeness. But we can also imagine that these experiences—and, relatedly, even her commitment to the norm against rudeness—are not so central to her values and identity that they are apt to distort her moral testimony.

Finally, and most importantly, explaining how confidence in reliable transmission “is harder to achieve in cases involving moral judgments” by pointing to the distorting influences of moral experience is a strategy that can be used, mutatis mutandis, to undermine dependence on non-moral testimony. It is a strategy that overgeneralizes, and thus it is not a strategy fit to undergird the asymmetry thesis. Consider, for example, that this sort of explanation would make sense of why Driver thinks that we should be wary of parents’ testimony about their children: the very experiences that enable parents’ to know their children better than the rest of us might tempt them, when testifying to others, to exaggerate their children’s positive qualities or achievements—both moral and non-moral.

3.5 Acting on the Basis of Dependence on Moral Testimony

Consider the following pair of cases:

LOW STAKES: Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. It is not important that they do so, as they have no impending bills. Hannah says, “I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. We can deposit our
paychecks tomorrow morning.”

**High Stakes:** Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. Hannah says, “I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. We can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning.”

Some might argue that while Hannah knows that the bank will be open in Low Stakes, in High Stakes she does not know that it will be open. The idea, put in general terms, is that our standards for knowledge and justification are sensitive to practical stakes. This idea, coupled with one plausible interpretation of internalism in ethics—roughly, that to sincerely make a moral judgment is, necessarily, to be motivated to act in accordance with that judgment at least to some extent—could be thought to pave the way for epistemic pessimism. That is, one might attempt to defend the asymmetry thesis by claiming that dependence on moral testimony is different from dependence on non-moral testimony because moral judgments are intrinsically directed towards motivation and action, and hence testimony about such matters carries with it risk that is not present in non-moral testimony.

The first thing to note in response to this line of thinking is that not all moral testimony is directed to the hearer’s action; on the basis of moral testimony one may be form views upon which one will never be called to act. Consider the following example:

**Unfair Boss:** Imagine that after work one day you meet up with a friend and he tells you all about his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day at work, and how his boss passed him up for a promotion, and gave the promotion to a co-worker. He testifies that his boss acted unfairly in doing so. You do not believe that your friend is better informed about potentially relevant non-moral facts (e.g., about his work-related abilities compared to

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94 Feltz and Zarpentine (2010).
those of his co-worker, or about his boss’s criteria for making the decision). You also know that your friend is normally trustworthy and reliable.

If your friend’s boss is a member of your weekly Bunco club, and you can reasonably expect to find yourself at intimate gatherings with him on a regular basis, then perhaps you ought to be less willing to readily accept your friend’s moral assessment in this case because it carries with it the moral risk of treating your friend’s boss poorly. But if you have never met your friend’s boss and that reasonably never expect to meet him, it would be unlikely that depending on your friend’s testimony, and so believing that his boss acted unfairly, would impact your moral agency moving forward.

That said, of course some moral testimony is directed at hearers’ actions. The concern may be that in these cases stakes are high. Further, even if you are reasonably confident that some bit of moral testimony is not relevant to your moral agency, you could be mistaken. And the costs of your being mistaken are also high. So, it might be argued that it is appropriate to use different standards for believing moral testimony and for believing non-moral testimony.

But this goes too fast. Even if we grant that some moral testimony carries with it a high degree of moral risk, we can still recognize that some non-moral testimony is extremely high-stakes as well. Take, for instance, non-moral testimony concerning the amount of weight a balcony can support, whether the defendant in fact drove the getaway car, how to properly install a carseat, etc. On the other side, there can also be low-stakes moral testimony, e.g., moral testimony concerning the permissibility of telling some particular white lie, whether your co-worker’s aunt is gracious, etc.

Since dependence on both moral and non-moral testimony and can be both low-
and high-stakes, there is no principled difference to be drawn the two in terms of practical stakes. So it seems that we should endorse a sliding scale of confidence in testifiers in general based on the risks of believing.

But even that goes too fast, for it is not even clear that a worry about practical stakes is germane to a defense of epistemic pessimism. Here is a position that seems sensible: in high stakes cases, testimony can transmit epistemic warrant so as to give rise to knowledge, but nevertheless in such cases hearers are not entitled to act on the basis of that knowledge. This is like a judge not being able to act on the basis of his well-grounded, testimonially-based beliefs, if the testimony constitutes evidence that would be inadmissible. That is, worries about the practical risks that can accompany dependence on testimony do not necessarily call into question epistemic warrant for one’s beliefs, but rather whether one can justifiably act on those beliefs. In contrast, as I noted above, some epistemologists have argued that epistemic warrant does in fact depend, in part, on practical stakes. They often appeal to cases like the bank cases to motivate their views. I am not committed either way on whether or not practical stakes partly determine epistemic entitlements. Instead, what I have shown so far—that there can be low stakes moral testimony, and high stakes non-moral testimony—is enough to demonstrate that there is no sense in which the stakes of testimony easily track the moral/non-moral distinction. So, even if epistemic warrant does depend on stakes, that fact should not be pressed into the service of a defense of the asymmetry thesis.

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95 See, for example, Fantl and McGrath (2002), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2007). For arguments that apply against these views see, for example, Feltz and Zarpentine (2010) and Buckwalter and Schaffer (2013).
4. **Conclusion**

I have considered five attempts by epistemic pessimists to explain the asymmetry thesis. Each attempt, I argued, failed. Given the *prima facie* case I made in favor of the No Difference Thesis, we are left with no good reason to abandon the thesis, and good reason to endorse it. If there is something generally problematic about dependence on moral testimony, it is not that it is unable to transmit moral knowledge.
CHAPTER III

PRACTICAL PESSIMISM

Even granting the NO DIFFERENCE THESIS—that there is no general difference between the transmission of epistemic warrant by moral and non-moral testimony—some philosophers have argued that dependence on moral testimony is morally problematic. These “practical” pessimists, as I have called them, allow that dependence on moral testimony can be unproblematic for children and others lacking developed agency. But for those who are morally mature agents, forming moral beliefs on the basis of moral testimony is morally criticizable.  

The most widely discussed and, it strikes me, most pressing version of practical pessimism portrays dependence on moral testimony as a problem for moral agency. The core claim of this camp of practical pessimists appeals to a distinction between moral knowledge and moral understanding—and the moral importance of possessing and acting from the latter. Moral pessimist Alison Hills serves as a representative example from this camp. Her worry, most basically, is that there is a fundamental tension between dependence on moral testimony and, as she puts it, “the ideal to have and use moral understanding to make moral judgments.”

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96 Even if it is permissible because, practically speaking, it is the best one can do.

97 See, for example, Crisp (2014), Hills (2009; 2010), Hopkins (2007), and Nickel (2001).

98 Hills (2013, 555).
Now of course, moral understanding is an epistemic notion. As such, it might be tempting to see the worry as a version of epistemic pessimism that runs along the following lines: given that dependence on moral testimony is in tension with having moral understanding, one is in a subpar epistemic state with respect to some moral proposition if one depends for knowledge of it on moral testimony. But someone who thinks that dependence on moral testimony puts you in a subpar epistemic state with respect to the moral, will also, I imagine, think that dependence on non-moral testimony puts you in a subpar epistemic state with respect to the non-moral (e.g., if you merely depend on others for your beliefs about logic, you lack logical understanding). What is needed for a defense of pessimism about moral testimony, then, is an argument for why lacking moral understanding is worse, in general, than lacking any sort of non-moral understanding. The pessimist views that I engage with in this chapter give arguments to this effect. On these views, the worry about moral understanding is fundamentally a practical worry: dependence on moral testimony is problematic because it is in tension with having and using moral understanding, and moral understanding is valuable because it is essential to central aspects of our moral agency (e.g., moral worth, moral virtue, etc.).

My aim in this chapter is to argue against this objection to dependence on moral testimony. In the first section, I explain more fully Hills’s worry about moral testimony.

99 In the next chapter, I argue for the non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony. One might charge that there is something epistemically subpar about dependence on moral testimony if it is incompatible with moral understanding (even allowing that this is not sufficient for a defense of pessimism or the asymmetry thesis). I take it, however, that my arguments in this chapter—that dependence on moral testimony is compatible with and sometimes leads to moral understanding—can be seen as responses to this charge as they show how dependence on moral testimony need not be epistemically subpar.
and moral understanding. In the second section, I argue one of the grounds that Hills adduces for the value of moral understanding—namely, that it is important for justifying ourselves to others—does not offer an adequate basis for criticizing dependence on moral testimony. In the third section, I show how, contra Hills, dependence on moral testimony is not incompatible with moral understanding. In the fourth section, I take this line of argument further and argue that, in fact, dependence on moral testimony can be an important avenue for achieving moral understanding. Finally, in the fifth section I contend that moral understanding is not always an ideal we have sufficient reason to seek.

1. **Hills’s Moral Understanding Worry**

According to Hills, what is wrong with dependence on moral testimony is that, even granting that moral testimony can reliably transmit moral knowledge, it cannot, at least on its own, transmit moral understanding. In Hills’s own words, there is “a key difference between knowledge… and understanding. If you are attempting to gain knowledge, testimony can serve as the justification for your own belief, but it is not usually a good way of acquiring moral understanding.”\(^{100}\) But this matters. On Hills’s view, moral agency is more than just a matter of true beliefs and right action: moral understanding is fundamental to being a good moral agent and acting well.\(^{101}\) More specifically, on Hills’s

\(^{100}\) Hills (2009, 121).

\(^{101}\) Hills (2009; 2010) also argues that the exercise and acquisition of moral understanding is an important epistemic ideal. So, she argues, to forgo the acquisition of moral knowledge in order that one may acquire moral understanding is not necessarily epistemically irrational.
view, moral understanding enables us to reliably judge rightly when it comes to moral matters and to justify ourselves to others, and it is essential to moral worth and virtue. In her view, then, because moral understanding is valuable in these ways, and because moral testimony does not transmit moral understanding, we have instrumental reason not to depend on moral testimony. Let’s take a further look at her defense of these claims.

1.1 The Nature of Moral Understanding

In order to fully appreciate Hills’s concerns about dependence on moral testimony, we must first appreciate her views about the nature and value of moral understanding. According to Hills, moral understanding and moral knowledge are “obviously different.”

Both moral understanding and moral knowledge are factive (you can neither know nor understand a proposition unless it is true). But to understand why some action is morally right, it is not enough for you to know that it is right, you must also grasp the reasons why it is right. As Hills explains, this involves various abilities:

If you understand why $p$ (and $q$ is why $p$), then in the right sort of circumstances you can successfully:

(i) follow an explanation of why $p$ given by someone else;
(ii) explain why $p$ in your own words;
(iii) draw the conclusion that $p$ (or probably $p$) from the information that $q$;
(iv) draw the conclusion that $p'$ (or that probably $p'$) from the information that $q'$ (where $p'$ and $q'$ are similar but not identical to $p$ and $q$)
(v) given the information that $p$, give the right explanation that $q$;
(vi) given the information that $p'$, give the right explanation $q'$.

102 Hills (2013, 555).

103 Ibid. (194-195).
To illustrate these conditions, consider Hills’s example of Mary:

**LYING**: Mary believes that she has moral reason not to lie because lying to others fails to respect them and in the long run tends to make them unhappy. She can see that there are differences between lying and not telling the whole truth. She thinks that lying for your own benefit is normally wrong, but it is harder to say whether lying to someone in a way that makes her happy is ever acceptable and this may depend on the exact circumstances of the case. She can apply these beliefs to new situations and judge which action is morally right.\(^{104}\)

We can plausibly imagine that in conversation, Mary can follow others’ explanations of the badness of lying, and she herself can articulate her reasons for thinking it bad, namely that it is disrespectful and tends to frustrate people’s happiness. So Mary satisfies conditions (i), (ii), and (v). It is also clear, from the case, that Mary believes that she has reason not to lie because she grasps of the reasons why lying is bad; that is, she appreciates \(p\)’s right-make reasons, and so satisfies condition (iii). Since the case states that Mary can apply her beliefs to new, yet similar situations, we can also plausibly imagine that Mary can, for example, readily see that there is reason not to coerce other people because, like lying, coercion is disrespectful and tends to lead to others’ unhappiness—so Mary satisfies conditions (iv) and (vi). On Hills’s view, since Mary satisfies conditions (i) through (vi), then supposing that Mary’s beliefs are correct Mary understands why she has moral reason not to lie.

Hills’s account of understanding, I should point out, is controversial. For example, Catherine Elgin has argued that understanding need not be factive by pointing to scientists’ ongoing and widespread use of strictly false idealizations.\(^{105}\) And Paulina

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\(^{105}\) Elgin (2007).
Sliwa has argued for reductionism about understanding: that knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for understanding.\(^{106}\)

While Hills’s view is controversial, I will nevertheless proceed in this chapter by granting Hills’s conception of moral understanding. Since her conception sets a comparably exacting standard for moral understanding (e.g., it requires all sorts of practical abilities),\(^{107}\) I take it that if my arguments here are successful in showing that Hills’s worry about moral understanding is wrongheaded, then they will apply to similar worries that employ a different, yet less demanding conception of moral understanding.

1.2 *The Value of Moral Understanding*

Hills takes moral understanding to be an extremely valuable part of our moral lives. She offers four distinct reasons for thinking that moral understanding is important. In this section I will lay out these reasons so that we can better appreciate her charge that dependence on moral testimony is in tension with having and using moral understanding.

The first reason Hills contends that moral understanding is valuable is because it is a route to reliably doing right. Consider, again,

**Vegetarian:** Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.\(^{108}\)

\(^{106}\) Sliwa (forthcoming).

\(^{107}\) Lackey thinks that Hills’s account is so exacting that it is “unreasonably stringent” (2013, 48).

\(^{108}\) Hills (2009, 94).
Let us assume, as Hills does, that eating meat (at least factory-farmed meat) is in fact wrong because factory-farming practices are grossly inhumane.\(^\text{109}\) Eleanor, by way of testimony, knows that eating meat is wrong, but she does not understand why it is wrong: although she knows the facts of the conditions in which animals on large-scale farms are kept, she cannot, by her own lights, from that information conclude that eating meat is wrong. Now imagine that Eleanor is considering buying a dog, and she has come across an online seller that sells puppies at incredibly low prices. After investigating a bit further, Eleanor discovers that the prices are so low because the puppies come from a large-scale breeding facility, often referred to as a “puppy mill.” The conditions of puppy mills are relevantly similar to those of livestock factory farms; dogs are forced to live in small, stacked wire enclosures, bred as often as possible, and often denied routine veterinary care. Since Eleanor cannot on her own appreciate how the conditions that animals are raised in should impact her eating habits, it is likely that she cannot appreciate how the conditions animals are raised in should impact her pet-buying practices. Alternatively, however, if Eleanor understood why eating meat was wrong—that is, if she understood that it is wrong to eat meat because it reinforces an inhumane practice—then she would likely be able to judge that buying a puppy from a puppy mill is similarly wrong because it supports institutionalized animal cruelty. Since part of moral understanding is the ability to make accurate judgments in new, yet similar circumstances, it is important because it helps us to navigate complex and shifting moral landscapes.

\(^\text{109}\) Hills writes, “Suppose that Eleanor trusts her reliable friends and thus knows that eating animals is wrong”; and also, “[E]ating animals is wrong because of the suffering of animals under modern farming methods” (2009, 100).
The second reason Hills regards moral understanding as important is because it is essential to virtue or good character. On Hills’s view, virtue has volitional and cognitive aspects: a virtuous person has good motivations, but she also has good judgment. Mere knowledge that some moral proposition is right, or even bare knowledge of why it is right, is not sufficient to realize the good judgment that is essential to virtue. To argue this, Hills presents the following example:

**The Incompetent Judge:** Claire has just been appointed as a judge and is very anxious to sentence people justly. But she finds it exceptionally difficult to work out the just punishment for various offenses, though she listens to the evidence presented carefully and tries her best to get the right answer. Luckily she has a mentor, a more experienced judge, Judith, who has excellent judgment. Claire always consults with Judith and gives her decision in accordance with Judith’s guidelines, offering Judith’s explanation of why the sentence is just to the defendants.\(^{110}\)

Hills contends that Claire is not a virtuous judge. Even though Claire reliably doles out fair sentences (because she depends on Judith’s “excellent judgment”), and even though she knows why the sentences are just (after all, she gives Judith’s explanation of the grounds of the sentences to the defendants), she herself lacks the ability to “derive the conclusion that that sentence is just from the reasons why it is just in this and similar circumstances.” In short, what Claire lacks is moral understanding.

The third reason Hills considers moral understanding valuable is because it is essential to morally worthy action. To soften us up to this idea, Hills reminds us of Kant’s well-known shopkeeper example: there seems to be an intuitive difference in the moral worth of the action of a shopkeeper who does not overcharge a patron merely out of concern for his own reputation and the action of a shopkeeper who does not overcharge because it would be unfair. This example lends intuitive support to the idea that right

\(^{110}\) Ibid. (110).
action alone is not enough for moral worth. Hills develops the example further:

Suppose that you give your customers the right change only because you were told by someone else that doing so is right. You may have good motivations (unlike the self-interested shopkeeper) but you did not choose your action on the basis of the reasons that make it right (rather, because you were told that it was right).\footnote{Hills (2013, 555).}

In such a case, Hills, argues, your action would lack moral worth.\footnote{We might wonder whether Hills’s view is that acting for the particular reasons that your act is right (and not just for the fact of rightness) is essential for full moral worth or for any moral worth. The text supports the latter interpretation of Hills’s view; she writes, “Your action is morally worthy only if it is performed for the right reasons… the reasons that make it right” (2009, 113-115); and an agent “has good motivations, he wants to do what is morally right and chooses in accordance with those desires, and he has moral knowledge too, but more is required for morally worthy action: you need to act for the reasons that make your action right” (Ibid., 117); and finally, “[M]orally worthy action must be based on the agent’s grasp of the reasons why the action is right and thus cannot be based on pure moral testimony” (2013, 556).} For an action to be morally worthy, on Hills’s view, it is not enough for you to take simply the fact of your action’s being right as your reason or motive for action. Indeed, Hills thinks that in the case above your action is morally defective because she thinks that for your action to have moral worth you must act in response to the particular reasons that your act is right and not just to the fact of rightness. On Hills’s view moral worth, like virtue, has a cognitive as well as volitional component: for an agent to act in a morally worthy manner, she must act on the basis of her grasp the action’s right-making reasons, which is to say she must act with moral understanding.

The idea that moral understanding is essential to morally worthy action is familiar (though controversial). It features prominently in other defenses of pessimism. Sarah McGrath, for instance, argues that, “If an agent $\Phi$s because of her belief that $\Phi$-ing is the...
right thing to do, but she does not understand why Φ-ing is the right thing to do, this
detracts from the moral status of her action.” And Philip Nickel argues that dependence
on moral testimony is problematic because it violates what he calls the “Recognition
Requirement,” which looks like a component of moral understanding, as Hills portrays it:

Morality aims at guiding action rationally, i.e. from a recognition of the
relevant moral requirements. A moral agent must be responsive to
morality as such… [I]t must be the case that morality requires one to act
from an understanding of moral claims, and therefore to have an
understanding of moral claims that are relevant to action… A person must
grasp, by and large, what would count as support for a moral belief in
order to understand it.

We can also find the idea that moral understanding is essential to moral worth at work in
moral theory, more generally. For instance, Christine Korsgaard writes that “to act from
duty is not just to be moved by a blank conviction that an action is required, but rather to
be moved by a more substantial thought which inherently involves an intelligent view of
why the action is required.”

Finally, the fourth reason Hills offers for the claim that moral understanding is
valuable is that it is crucial to our ability to justify ourselves to others, an important moral
practice. She writes,

A core ethical practice is the exchange of reasons. According to Scanlon’s
contractualist theory, to be motivated morally precisely is to be motivated
to find a justification for what we do… [T]he practice of exchanging
reasons and the motivation to find a justification that could not be
reasonably rejected by others is clearly very morally important.

113 McGrath (2011, 132).
It you lack moral understanding, and so do not grasp why your actions are right, you limit your ability to participate in the morally important practice of justifying yourself to others by explaining the substantive grounds for your actions.

1.3 Moral Understanding and Moral Testimony

Given these reasons for thinking moral understanding morally valuable, Hills thinks that dependence on moral testimony is in serious trouble. She writes, “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,”\textsuperscript{117} and that “there are reasons not to trust moral testimony…because you should try to gain and use ‘moral understanding.’”\textsuperscript{118} According to Hills, the problem with dependence on moral testimony, simply put, is that it is at odds with the development and exercise of moral understanding, and so at odds with reliably doing right, cultivating or exhibiting virtue, moral worth, and justifying ourselves to others.

Even allowing that dependence on moral testimony can transmit epistemic warrant, Hills argues dependence on morally testimony is “not a good way of acquiring moral understanding.”\textsuperscript{119} For moral understanding is comprised of various \textit{abilities}, which many would agree cannot be delivered by testimony alone but must be cultivated

\textsuperscript{117} Ib. (126).

\textsuperscript{118} Hills (2013, 552).

\textsuperscript{119} Hills (2009, 109).
through practice: to borrow an example from Daniel Groll and Jason Decker, to become a more able bowler, it is not enough to “hit the books,” you must also bowl.\textsuperscript{120}

Furthermore, Hills contends that you should not “trust moral testimony but…take advice and use your own judgment, in order to leave open the possibility of your acquiring and using your moral understanding.”\textsuperscript{121} This passage shows that Hills not only thinks that moral testimony does not transmit moral understanding, but also that dependence on moral testimony closes off the possibility of developing and using moral understanding.

2. \textit{Moral Understanding, Moral Testimony, and Justifying Yourself to Others}

Before assessing the merits of Hills’s view that we have instrumental reason not to depend on moral testimony because there is a fundamental tension between doing so and developing and using moral understanding, in this section I will argue that Hills’s appeal to the moral importance of justifying ourselves to others does not form a good basis for criticizing dependence on moral testimony. To do so, I will first argue that Hills’s argument that justifying ourselves to others is morally important is unsuccessful. Second, even setting this aside and granting that justifying ourselves to others is in fact morally important, I will argue that this does not on its own show that there is any general problem with dependence on moral testimony.

Hills’s basic idea is that since dependence on moral testimony involves us in simply taking another’s word without grasping the reasons that justify some moral

\textsuperscript{120} Groll and Decker (2014, 58).

\textsuperscript{121} Hills (2009, 125).
proposition, such dependence frustrates our capacity to justify ourselves to others. Hills is not alone in pursuing this line of argument. Recall from Chapter I Nickel’s RENT MONEY example:

**RENT MONEY:** Suppose my friend has asked me to loan him some money for rent, but it seems likely to me that if I loan him the money it will allow him to avoid a crisis in which he might come to terms with his addiction to heroin and alcohol. I cannot decide what to do, and I ask my mother what she thinks. According to her, I ought to tell my friend that I will loan him some money as soon as he gets his life together.122

Discussing this case, Nickel writes:

What if my friend wants to know, as he has been evicted from his apartment, why I decided as I did? It seems doubtful to me that he would be satisfied by the reply, “That’s what my mother told me I should do. She is much more experienced than I am at making decisions about this kind of thing, and she knows what to do.” Nor should he be satisfied by this reply. In cases such as this, there is something lacking about my justification if I offer no independent support for my moral beliefs, but only defer to my mother’s better judgment. This case evokes an intuition about what sort of justification can be acceptably given by one person to another person.123

On Hills’s and Nickel’s view there is good reason to morally criticize dependence of moral testimony: if justifying ourselves to others is a “core ethical practice,” to borrow Hills’s words, then it looks like if we are unable to articulate or grasp the reasons that justify our moral beliefs and actions, then we are in some way failing to be excellent moral agents. Or so they argue.

To motivate their views, both Hills and Nickel appeal to Thomas Scanlon’s moral theory. But in doing so they trade on equivocations of different senses of “justify” and so misrepresent Scanlon’s view. Note what Scanlon has in mind in outlining his view:

122 Nickel (2001, 256)

123 Ibid.
In assessing this challenge it is important to bear in mind that what I am claiming to be central to moral motivation is not the activity of actual justification to others (which does make sense only in relation to individuals with whom we are in contact and communication) but rather the ideal of acting in a way that is justifiable to them, on grounds they could not reasonably reject.  

In this passage, Scanlon makes clear that the ideal on his view is *not to justify* ourselves to others, or even to be in fact *able to justify* ourselves to others, but rather to act in ways that are *justifiable*. So Hills tries to saddle Scanlon with a view that is not his when she writes that “to be motivated morally precisely is to be motivated to find a justification for what we do.”  

To be morally motivated, on Scanlon’s view, is to take oneself to have a reason to act according to principles that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject.

It might be thought that it does not matter one way or the other whether Hills and Nickel have accurately portrayed Scanlon’s view, and that all that really matters is whether dependence on moral testimony does in fact undermine our justificatory practices in ways that are morally troubling. This thought is reinforced by the fact that Hills distances herself from Scanlon’s view when she writes,  

> While I do not intend to defend contractualism generally, nor do I want to suggest that this is the only (or even the most important) kind of moral motivation, nevertheless, the practice of exchanging reasons and the motivation to find a justification that could not be reasonably rejected by others is clearly very morally important.

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124 Scanlon (2000, 168-169)


126 Ibid. (107).
But by distancing herself from Scanlon’s view, Hills takes on more of an onus to explain how and why justifying ourselves to others is important. Here’s the example that she gives in order to do so:

Suppose your reliable friend has told you not to cheat your customers because doing so is unfair. You believe her, but on your own behalf, you cannot really see anything wrong with enriching your shareholders at your customers’ expense. This is a perfectly good sense in which you know why cheating your customers is wrong: you know that it is unfair… So you say to your customers what you were told… but you cannot give an explanation in your own words, and you cannot reassure customers that under slightly different circumstances, you would treat them well.\textsuperscript{127}

While it strikes me as exceedingly plausible that at least sometimes, depending on the circumstances, it is important to be able to justify ourselves to others, this case is a long way from providing compelling evidence that being in a position to justify ourselves to others is a “core ethical practice.” There is, after all, a really straightforward explanation of our intuitive unease about this case in which justifying ourselves to others does not feature: that you do not know that exploiting your customers for shareholders’ benefit is wrong, and that you might very well do it in the future.

But let us set this point aside and, for the sake of argument, simply grant the fundamental importance of being able to justify ourselves to others. Even so, Hills’s and Nickel’s appeal to justification to criticize dependence on moral testimony is still in trouble. Often, when we depend on moral testimony, we can in fact justify ourselves to others.\textsuperscript{128} To see this point, take the \textsc{Rent Money} example. It is not like all you can say to your friend in explaining your decision to refuse the loan is “Gee, that’s what my mom

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{128} We might be able to justify ourselves to others because, as I argue in Section 2 of this chapter, we might \textit{both} depend on moral testimony concerning some moral proposition and have moral understanding concerning that very same proposition.
told me to do,” full stop. On Nickel’s own unpacking of the example, you tell your friend that your mom is more likely to be right about the matter at hand. We can imagine riffs on this sort of explanation, e.g., you tell your friend that your worried that you are too close to the situation to make a reasoned judgment, you tell your friend that your mom recently went through this with a close friend and so your trust her sensibilities, etc. By acknowledging your own epistemic limitations or biases, by attesting to your reasons for trusting your mom’s judgment more than your own, you offer a sort of indirect justification of your action by offering reason to think that your deference is wise.129

Furthermore, the Rent Money case states that you are concerned that loaning your friend money might ultimately fuel his addiction. So it is not as if you are utterly blind to the sorts of considerations that count in favor of your course of action. Indeed, most plausibly you have a sense of what sorts of moral considerations support your action. It is just that, in deliberating about what to do, you turn to your mom for guidance because you are somewhat unsure of how to weigh these considerations. So at the very least, dependence on moral testimony for the purpose of making conclusions of weight is still acceptable. In addition to explaining reasons for your dependence, you are also in a position to give your friend a sense of the “independent support” for your action (i.e., you are worried that loaning him the money will enable his self-destructive behaviors).

129 One might worry that the more you can justify yourself to others, the less dependent you are upon moral testimony. So, for example, the more you can provide grounds for recognizing what makes your mother’s moral judgment worth depending on in Rent Money, the less dependent you are on her judgment. However, as I argue in Section 3.2 of Chapter II, we often have a large set of background beliefs, moral and non-moral, that set the context for our dependence on testimony. Even if these beliefs limit the strength of our dependence, they do not preclude our dependence on testimony from being so strong as to make all the difference between belief and disbelief.
Admittedly, indirect justification for dependence is not the sort of justification that Hills and Nickel are concerned with. They care about justification for moral judgments or actions in terms of first-order deliberations about what makes those judgments or actions right. This makes sense of why Hills and Nickel appeal to Scanlon: Scanlon does not seem to be concerned with merely the providing epistemic justification for a moral conclusion, but with providing the substantive grounds of for our moral judgments. But that’s a very particular sense of what morally valuable justification to others looks like, one that Scanlon defends as the upshot of an entire, robust moral theory. Whatever the merits of Scanlon’s theory, if Hills and Nickel want to successfully narrow the sense of justification that they take to be morally valuable, then they have more work to do. As pessimists about dependence on moral testimony, a major challenge to such an endeavor for Hills and Nickel will be narrowing the sense of moral justification that can, as Nickel puts it, “be acceptably given by one person to another person,” without also impugning our practices of justification when it comes to depending on non-moral testimony. Often times we act on the basis of our dependence on non-moral testimony when the stakes for others are high; if indirect justification for our dependence on moral testimony is “unacceptable,” it is not clear why it would also be unacceptable in high-stakes non-moral cases.

So, without a better argument that justification for our moral beliefs is only valuable when it provides the substantive grounds of for our moral judgments, Hills’s and Nickel’s appeal to the moral importance of justifying ourselves to others does not form a good basis for criticizing dependence on moral testimony. At any rate, for the sake of argument I will proceed in the rest of this chapter under the assumption that moral
understanding is valuable in just the ways that Hills contends that it is, so that I can assess Hills’s larger project, to show there is tension between dependence on moral testimony and moral understanding.

3. **The Compatibility of Dependence on Moral Testimony and Moral Understanding**

In this section I will dispel the supposed tension between dependence on moral testimony and moral understanding. Let me clarify my aim. I am happy to concede that there are people for whom dependence on moral testimony does in fact impede their acquiring and using moral understanding. Suppose I have a friend whom I know to be really morally reliable who is always ready to answer my requests for moral judgments. Maybe I will just get lazy and continually allow myself to be guided by her, and do so in a way that never probes the basis for her judgments. This would likely stand in the way of my gaining and using moral understanding. So I am not interested in denying that some people’s dependence on moral testimony can impede their moral understanding. What I do deny is Hills’s worry that there is something about dependence on moral testimony that by its nature is incompatible with, or that blocks, moral understanding. To explain and defend this, I will lay out two important types of cases: first, cases in which dependence simply precedes in time, but is then replaced by moral understanding, and second, cases in which one can, concerning the very same proposition, be both dependent on moral testimony and have moral understanding.

Hills thinks that the tension she has identified between dependence on moral testimony and moral understanding has an important practical import, namely, that we
have strong reasons not to depend on moral testimony. I disagree. And the reason why is rather simple: If I currently lack some bit of knowledge and understanding on some moral matter, and I acquire moral knowledge by deferring to some testifier that I (rightly) think is reliable, there is no reason to think that this knowledge inhibits my path to moral understanding—which, as we posited, I did not have in the first place. What follows from Hills’s argument, if anything, is not that you have reason not to trust moral testimony, but the much less interesting conclusion that you have reason not to just trust moral testimony. Why not think that you should trust moral testimony on some occasion and continue to use your own judgment to reflect on the relevant matters in order achieve moral understanding? Moral questions are, after all, often difficult and complex, and figuring them out for oneself can be a lengthy, taxing process. Recall again the 

**Wedding Testimony** example:

**Wedding Testimony:** 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. They decide to ask a friend. She tells them that it’s permissible to ask the wealthier family for a greater contribution, and Tom and Sara, knowing that she’s normally trustworthy and reliable, believe her.¹³⁰

As I suggested in Chapter II, perhaps Tom and Sara asked for their friend’s guidance because they both felt too caught up in the added stresses of wedding planning to make a clearheaded decision about whether or not to ask Tom’s family for more money. We can imagine that after the wedding, once Tom and Sara have a chance to reflect in a calmer fashion, they reconsider their judgment—once based on their friend’s moral testimony—

¹³⁰ Sliwa (2012, 184).
and come to believe, by their own lights, that the judgment is independently supported by the balance of reasons. Considering this case, it is not hard to see how one can come to believe something on the basis of moral testimony, and then cease to depend on moral testimony because one now has moral understanding. So, depending on moral testimony does not stand in the way of one developing one’s moral understanding.

Note, too, that having come later to achieve understanding, one’s reasons for belief may still include the testimony; indeed, having come later to achieve understanding, the reasons given by the testimony could still be sufficient for one’s justified belief. Consider first a non-moral example. You rightly come to know the position of an object by perception. Later, you work out its position as an implication of its properties and the laws of motion. The understanding you develop by doing so does not undermine your accepting the fact on the basis of and taking warrant to be conferred by your perception of the object’s position. Your initial perception caused your justified belief, and even though you are now in a position to grasp the position of the object according to the laws of physics, your belief might very well still be based on and epistemically justified by your initial perception. We can imagine, for example, that after you have done your calculations a friend asks you where the object is and you tell him, and when he asks you how you know that, you respond, “Because I saw it there.”

We can make an analogous case for moral testimony. You can come to believe some moral proposition on the basis of another’s moral testimony, and even though you later come to appreciate that proposition’s right-making reasons on your own, it still might be the case that psychologically and epistemically your belief is based on, at least in part, the initial moral testimony.
Consider another example from Sliwa that I discussed in Chapter II:

**Rude Email:** Anna shares the social norm against rudeness and she is trying hard to be polite, but she cannot always tell whether her tone of voice, her behavior or an email she is writing is rude. She worries about this because she doesn’t want to be rude. Therefore, whenever she is uncertain, she relies on her friend’s judgment.\(^{131}\)

Imagine that Anna sent off a quick-fire email response to her supervisor and then, worried that it might have come off as rude, she asked her friend what she thought. Her friend told her that the email was unduly curt, and Anna justifiably (e.g., her friend is reliable, and Anna knows this) depended on her moral testimony. Now imagine that over time, with practice, Anna has developed greater sensitivities to how norms of rudeness play out in virtual contexts, to such an extent that we can rightly say of her that she now has moral understanding about rudeness and politeness in tone and delivery when it comes to email. Cleaning out her inbox, Anna comes across the email that she sent to her boss, and with her newly developed capacities of moral understanding, sees for herself that the email was rude. Epistemically, Anna’s grounds for believing that the email was rude that are based on her own, first-personal deliberations do not nullify her testimonially-based epistemic reasons; in fact, depending on the strength of these considerations, her belief may be epistemically overdetermined. Similarly, Anna may at once see for herself the rudeness of the email, while at the same time continuing to take—in a robustly psychological sense—her friend’s say-so as sufficient reason for believing that the email was rude.

Our basis for thinking that Anna may well continue to take her friend’s say-so as sufficient is, in this case as in the perception case, counterfactual—if, for example, Anna

\(^{131}\) Ibid. (180).
decided that she did not really have moral understanding of why her email was rude, would she continue to believe it was? If so, then it looks like her friend’s testimony is still doing its work.

We can also make analogous (and I think familiar) cases for other ways of forming moral beliefs. Take moral intuition for example. You form some moral judgment on the basis of your intuition; it just seems to you that some moral proposition, \( p \), is right. Later, you encounter an argument for \( p \) that strikes you as sound. In debates with others, and when pressed about your belief that \( p \), you might reference to this argument. But even though you know and assent to the argument for \( p \), you might very well take your intuition that \( p \) to be sufficient for believing that \( p \).

There is another important sense in which dependence on moral testimony and moral understanding can be had, in some cases, at one and the same time. In Chapter I, I pointed out that there are varieties of dependence on testimony. At one extreme, an agent may depend on moral testimony because she utterly lacks an appreciation of the sorts of considerations that decide some moral matter. Alternatively, she may have a sense of what sorts of moral considerations are at stake, but in deliberating about the matter at hand she may turn to a reliable moral testifier for guidance because she is unsure of how to weigh these considerations. As I suggested in Chapter I, this latter possibility fits well with the WEDDING TESTIMONY case: Tom and Sara are sensitive to the main moral considerations in play, but they are just unsure about how to weigh those considerations. They are, for example, aware that there is a sense in which it is fair to ask each set of parents for a contribution that’s proportional to their income or wealth, but there just not sure if this consideration outweighs the sense in which it is fair to ask both sets of parents
for equal contributions, and so they depend on their friend’s moral testimony to weigh these considerations.

Recall Hills’s conditions for moral understanding, which include the ability to appreciate an action’s right-making reasons, the ability to articulate these reasons, and the ability to make accurate judgments in new, yet similar circumstances. If Tom and Sara already appreciate that reasons of fairness count in favor of asking the wealthier parents for a greater contribution as I suggested, then why not think that they could explain these reasons in their own words and draw conclusions about similar cases? For example, suppose that Tom and Sara are trying to finance Sara’s graduate education. If they already know that it is permissible to ask Tom’s parents for more money than Sara’s parents for the wedding, why would they not be able to conclude that asking his parents for more money for her schooling is also permissible? The mere fact that the knowledge in question is testimonially-based does not at all seem to preclude this. Described in this way, it looks like WEDDING TESTIMONY is a case in which Tom and Sara, even though they depend on moral testimony in coming to believe that it is permissible to ask Tom’s parents for a greater contribution, can satisfy Hills’s conditions for moral understanding.

I have argued that the supposed tension between dependence on moral testimony and the ideal of moral understanding is illusory. Not only does dependence on moral testimony not stand in the way of one’s development of moral understanding, but one might at depend on moral testimony about some proposition and have moral understanding of that very same proposition. By showing that one can initially depend on moral testimony for her belief that \( p \), and then later come to understand that \( p \), and by showing that one can depend on moral testimony for her belief that \( p \) while also
understanding that \( p \), I have shown that there is no inherent incompatibility between dependence on moral testimony and moral understanding. So, even granting that moral understanding is valuable in the ways that Hills contends it is, that does not by itself constitute a criticism of agents who depend on moral testimony.

4. **Dependence on Moral Testimony as a Route to Moral Understanding**

Not only is dependence on moral testimony not incompatible with the development and exercise of moral understanding, sometimes dependence on moral testimony may actually give rise to moral understanding. Hills contends that “testimony… is not usually a good way of acquiring moral understanding,”\(^{132}\) but in this section I will argue that in many cases dependence on moral testimony sets one up to achieve moral understanding.

It strikes me that part of the most likely explanation of why so many of us are just fine with children depending on moral testimony is that we share an assumption that such dependence will ultimately help children to develop their capacities for moral understanding. But even for sincere, mature adults, moral deference can serve as an indispensable tool for the cultivation of our capacities for moral understanding. Think again of Karen Jones’ Peter:

**Peter:** Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of sexism and racism… Such blindness can sometimes indicate insincerity, but in Peter’s case it did not… He could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’ applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to non-egregious new cases.\(^{133}\)

\(^{132}\) Hills (2009, 121).

\(^{133}\) Jones (1999, 59-60).
Peter and his neighbors are trying to decide whom to admit as new members of their cooperative housing unit. Peter depends on his female neighbors’ judgments of sexism regarding the applicant pool, believing his neighbors to be reliable and trustworthy and acknowledging his own inability to pick out subtle instances of sexism. Depending on his female neighbors’ moral testimony might help Peter to hone his own capacities of moral perception, such that he is able to distinguish instances of sexism for himself. There is no guarantee that this will happen (just as there are no guarantees with the moral education of children). But if Peter sincerely commits to developing his moral sensitivities, it is possible that by believing his neighbors’ reports and the reports of others who have more intimately experienced oppression, Peter will first learn to reliably track cases of sexism, and then to understand why these cases constitute sexism.

Peter already sees the value in living according to his commitments to norms against racism and sexism, and his dependence on moral testimony is a way for him to learn how to do so. But dependence on moral testimony is not just a way to learn how to apply our values; it can also serve as a way to learn what has value in the first place. Consider the following case (close variants of which I have witnessed many times in the classroom):

**Melanie:** On the first day of her introduction to philosophy class, Melanie’s professor made a point of talking about the importance of inclusive language practices for class discussion, and in general. Melanie had always thought that saying ‘you guys,’ for example, was just a casual, harmless way of speaking. But she had heard great things about her professor and she took him to be reliable, and so she believed him.

We can imagine that, before taking the philosophy class, Melanie had always thought that for the most part one’s communicative intentions were what really mattered, and that we
should not get too caught up in “just semantics.” But, by believing her professor, Melanie began to see her use of language as ripe for moral investigation. She became aware, even, of how gendered language practices had made her feel silenced in the classroom, even though at the times when this had happened she would have likely just attributed her own quietness to being shy.

As many moral philosophers have discussed, our moral commitments and beliefs have the power to shape the landscape of our deliberations by informing what we see as valuable, by shaping what sorts of considerations we see as even eligible to count as reasons in our deliberations, and by impacting the weight we give to those reasons.

Valerie Tiberius, for example, argues that

\[E\]ngaging in the pursuit of ends or obtaining an emotional grasp of certain values is not an abstract intellectual exercise… [I]t is from within [practical] perspectives that we learn about what has value and that some of what there is to learn can only be learned by being absorbed by the values in question.\(^{134}\)

Melanie came to understand that inclusive language practices are valuable by first believing that they were, and by “being absorbed” in the practices themselves. We can apply the basic idea here in a more general defense of dependence on moral testimony as a route to moral understanding: in many cases, such as in Melanie’s, the sorts of matters that are salient to moral understanding are not grasped, at least by many agents, until the relevant moral facts are accepted as truths by way of moral testimony.

\(^{134}\) Tiberius (2005, 168).
In the preceding sections, I argued that dependence on moral testimony need not inhibit the acquisition of moral understanding, and that sometimes dependence on moral testimony in fact promotes it. In doing so, I simply assumed that we should aim to achieve moral understanding. In this section, however, I will step back from this assumption: I will show that even granting that moral understanding in valuable and that it is better to have moral understanding than to have mere moral knowledge, that fact alone is not a basis for further claims about whether we should aim for moral understanding. To show this, I will lay out two important types of cases. First, I will consider cases in which the costs of developing moral understanding are high relative to the impact of the moral understanding for our agency. Second, I will consider cases in which moral understanding is inextricably tied up with experiences of evil and suffering. I will argue that in both types of cases, we do not have sufficient reason to seek moral understanding. If I am right on these points, then in these cases agents who depends on moral testimony are not subject to the practical pessimists’ criticisms.

5.1 The Material Costs of Moral Understanding

Moral matters are often complex, and it can take a lot of time, effort, and careful reasoning to come to recognize and appreciate their nuances. Thus, the development of moral understanding can be something very hard and time-consuming to realize. Especially in specialized domains, when costs of developing moral understanding are usually particularly high and the practical value of moral understanding is infrequently
realized, developing moral understanding may not be worth it.

If, for example, one has to immerse oneself deeply and for a long time in the world of dog shows in order to understand why (in Hills’s sense) a certain way of talking about a certain instance of a certain breed of dog is cruel or unjust or callous, then perhaps one should just take the say-so of a more properly attuned person on the subject. In such a case, not only do we have to consider the direct costs of putting in immense time and energy in order to develop moral understanding about particularized dog-talk, but we also have to consider the opportunity costs, i.e., those associated with devoting time and energy that one could have used in the pursuit of other morally valuable goods, e.g., friendships, self-care, moral understanding about matters more central to one’s own life, etc. For many of us, these direct and indirect costs are likely to outweigh the good of developing moral understanding of dog-talk, because not only are the costs of developing such understanding high, for many of us the practical value of it is low. For example, as someone who is not interested in dogs or pets, I rarely have occasion to speak of dogs in general, let alone particular species of dogs.

Recall why Hills claims that moral understanding is valuable: it leads us to reliably do right; it puts us in a better position to justify ourselves to others; and it is an essential part of virtue and moral worth. For someone like me, who has never and likely will never have reason to talk of specific dog breeds, it is highly unlikely that value of the moral understanding in question will be realized in these ways.

Contrast the dog breed case with two of the most oft-discussed examples of dependence on moral testimony: the case of Peter, who is unable to pick out instances of racism and sexism, and the case of Eleanor, who is uncertain about whether or not it is
permissible to eat meat. Even if the costs, direct and indirect, of developing moral understanding about racism, sexism, and vegetarianism, are similarly high compared to the costs of developing moral understanding of highly specialized dog-talk, the likelihood of realized benefits are higher in the former than the latter. Many, and perhaps most, mature moral agents will, as a matter of fact, find moral questions surrounding race, gender, and diet unavoidable, whereas they might never realistically find occasion to speak of specific dog breeds.

Hills contends, “Given the importance of our acquiring and using moral understanding, we have strong reasons neither to trust moral testimony nor to defer to moral experts.”\(^\text{135}\) But sometimes the reasons for seeking moral understanding are quite weak, as when the practical import of the moral understanding is relatively insignificant. And sometimes the costs of seeking moral understanding are quite high. In those cases—when the reasons for seeking it are weak and the costs of seeking it are high—then we might have good reason to simply depend on moral testimony and forego seeking moral understanding.

5.2 Moral Understanding of Evils

Many philosophers recognize that there is a special kind of knowledge that can only be had by way of experience. This knowledge is knowledge of “what it’s like,” or phenomenal knowledge. An experience is epistemically transformative when it positions you to access this sort of knowledge.\(^\text{136}\) Phenomenal knowledge undergirds a lot of moral understanding.

\(^{135}\) Hills (2009, 98).

\(^{136}\) For a detailed unpacking of epistemically transformative experiences, see Paul (2014).
understanding. This preserves the widely shared intuition that moral experience is epistemically important. If moral understanding is a moral ideal, then it follows that it is ideal to have the phenomenal knowledge that undergirds moral understanding. If that is true, then it might be thought that we have strong reason to undergo epistemically transformative experiences that position us to have this phenomenal knowledge.

But consider the following real-life example. Hidden in a small bathroom for 91 days alongside seven other women, Immaculée Ilibagiza survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Outside the cramped, three-by-four foot room, Ilibagiza’s mother, father, and two brothers were among the estimated 800,000 people brutally killed in just 100 days in the horrifically violent ethnic cleansing campaign. Ilibagiza has, time and again, made statements that amount to affirming that her experience of surviving the Rwandan genocide was epistemically transformative; in a moving speech at her U.S. naturalization ceremony last spring, she said, “The genocide was horrible. But it taught me a lot. It taught me the price of love, of peace, of freedom. And I lost my family, but I gained understanding about life.”

Ilibagiza’s own accounts of her mental states during and after the genocide provide strong evidence of the transformative nature of her experiences. Ilibagiza, who eventually found the courage and grace to forgive her transgressors—even going so far as to say to the face of her mother and brother’s killer, “I forgive you”—has acknowledged that the path to her new “understanding about life” was paved with feelings of anger, and even hatred; while hiding in the bathroom, she

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137 Pearson (2013).
explained, “My own prayers were about 'Kill them! Kill them back! Take them to hell.”

Some transformative experiences, such as Ilibagiza’s, lead to phenomenal knowledge of what it is like to suffer in horrendous ways. Presumably, then, victims of heinous crimes can have a sort of phenomenal knowledge, and the related moral understanding that this knowledge can undergird, that those of us who have not had similar experiences lack; for example, relative to others, these victims can have an ability to appreciate the heinousness of the crime in thicker moral terms or, as in Ilibagiza’s case, moral understanding around the contours of forgiveness for atrocities. These sorts of moral understanding are just better not to have, because understanding the badness of the evils involved requires experience of them, and these evils may be such that no one has sufficient reason to undergo them. Further, it is pretty clear that we have compelling moral reason not to facilitate the conditions under which others or we could acquire these sorts of moral understanding; for example, it is obvious that I should not organize genocides so that people have a chance to undergo transformative experiences like Ilibagiza did. Even without facilitating these conditions, just putting oneself in them in the name of seeking moral understanding can plausibly be seen as morally fetishistic and, relatedly, a demonstration of a morally objectionable lack of self-concern. Put more generally, the point is that the means of achieving some sorts of moral understanding (e.g., moral understanding of evils) might themselves be morally bad. Even granting “the importance of our acquiring and using moral understanding,” to borrow Hills’s words, we should acknowledge that our pursuit of moral understanding faces moral limits.

138 Ibid.
6. Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that dependence on moral testimony and the development and exercise of moral understanding are not incompatible; that dependence on moral testimony can lead to moral understanding; and that in some cases moral understanding may not be worth seeking, either because it is too costly, or because the means of seeking it are, themselves, morally bad. These arguments, taken together, show that versions of practical pessimism about dependence on moral testimony that appeal to the value of moral understanding as a moral ideal are unpromising.
In the preceding chapter I argued that although moral testimony does not on its own give moral understanding, that is no basis for criticizing agents who depend on it. This leaves open, though, the idea there is something essentially second-best about dependence on moral testimony. Even if we allow that dependence on moral testimony is not incompatible with moral understanding or that it sometimes might lead to moral understanding, and even if we allow that it is permissible for agents to depend on moral testimony if it is the best they can do given their circumstances, it could still be that dependence on moral testimony is second-best if it is ultimately called for in response to agents’ imperfections.

Going defenses of dependence on moral testimony have tended to work from the assumption that such dependence is second-best in this sense, for they center on how our epistemic limitations work to justify our deference.\textsuperscript{139,140} The basic idea (developed in

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\item \textsuperscript{139} Moral defenses of dependence on moral testimony have been put forth by Enoch (2014); Groll and Decker (2014); Jones (1999); Sliwa (2012); Markovits (2012); and Wiland (2015).
\item \textsuperscript{140} One important exception is Jollimore (2011). Jollimore’s remarks on moral testimony are very brief (since it is not his principle concern to examine dependence on moral testimony but to give an account of the nature of love, more broadly), so it is difficult to gauge the extent to which he thinks that dependence on moral testimony is defensible. It is clear that he thinks some forms of dependence on moral testimony have value that is not rooted in our epistemic limitations, but instead are valuable because they constitute acts of love. In his example of Agnes and Brad, which I lay out later in this chapter, he
\end{itemize}
different ways) at the heart of these defenses is the idea that acceptable dependence on moral testimony is all about depending on others when one’s own epistemic position is somehow constrained or problematic. These defenses of dependence on moral testimony, motivated as they are in terms of agents’ epistemic biases or relative disadvantages, have portrayed the normative pull to depend on moral testimony as merely the pull to overcome our epistemic limitations in order to judge and act rightly.

In this chapter, however, I urge that this picture of what is morally at stake in depending on moral testimony is too crude. I argue that there is value in developing a disposition to depend on moral testimony, and more specifically a disposition to depend on an intimate’s moral testimony. Such a disposition, I contend, can be instrumentally valuable in ways that have not been commented upon in the moral testimony literature. What is more, such a disposition can be non-instrumentally valuable: on my view, our dependence on moral testimony need not be second-best (although I agree that sometimes it is) because a disposition to depend on moral testimony can be a constituent part of the ideal of intimate relationships.

My strategy in this chapter is as follows. First, I more fully demonstrate how going defenses of dependence on moral testimony have portrayed it as second-best. Then, makes clear that sometimes depending on our friends’ moral testimony is valuable when the content of the testimony involves moral assessments of our loved ones’ characters or actions. But it is less clear what he thinks of the value of depending on moral testimony when the content does not explicitly reference our loved ones. So, in the next section in which I characterize going defenses of dependence on moral testimony, I will set Jollimore (2011) aside and focus on works that are, first and foremost, defenses of dependence on moral testimony.

Still, I am indebted to Jollimore’s work, particularly in my response to the worry that my view leads to epistemic irrationality (a worry that I take up and respond to in Chapter V). As I explain in section 4, however, Jollimore’s account and my account are importantly different.
after highlighting a key assumption that has framed the current debate about the moral status of dependence on moral testimony, I present a new entry point into the debate, suggesting that we examine the distinctive contours of dependence in the context of intimate relationships, specifically close friendships. Next, I give a positive argument for my view that there can be value in developing a disposition to depend a friend’s moral testimony. This value is non-remedial: it goes beyond the value of resolving moral uncertainty in light of our epistemic limitations, and is instead grounded in the ways that dependence expresses the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship. Finally, I conclude by situating my view amidst nearby views in the literature on epistemic partiality. I argue that because my account is dispositional, unlike going epistemic partiality views, it can avoid two charges to which these views are vulnerable, namely the charge that they are committed to doxastic voluntarism and the charge that they give the “wrong kinds of reasons” for belief.

1. **A Brief Preliminary**

In the rest of this chapter, I investigate the value of a disposition to depend on moral testimony under the assumption we know that our friends are in fact reliable and trustworthy with respect to the moral matters in question; there are no defeaters; etc. I will do so because moral pessimists have claimed that dependence on moral testimony is problematic even under these epistemically idealized situations. For example, as Roger Crisp argues, “[A]n agent who did the right thing but only through reliance on the testimony of another—however well justified such reliance might be, and however
reliable the testimony—could plausibly be said to be morally and epistemically
defective.” While my assumption is in keeping with the ongoing debate, I recognize
that reality often strays from the ideal (e.g., sometimes our friends are unreliable, or even
terribly unreliable), and so I will examine what I call in “The Problem of Unreliable
Testifiers” in the next, final chapter.

2. **Re-Framing the Debate**

The goal of this section is to present a new entry point into the debate about dependence
on moral testimony by suggesting that we examine the normative features of such
dependence in the context of friendships. To that end, I first explain going defenses of
dependence on moral testimony have portrayed it as, in a sense, second-best because they
appeal to our epistemic limitations. I also show how thinking about dependence on moral
testimony in terms of dispositions—as I do in my own positive defense of dependence on
moral testimony—puts us in a position to see that the relationship between acts of
dependence and our epistemic limitations is more complex than optimists have tended to
acknowledge. Then, I highlight an assumption that has framed the current debate about
the moral status of dependence on moral testimony; namely, the assumption that the only
relationship that fundamentally matters between the hearer and the testifier is that of
*seeker-of-truth* and *reliable evidential source*. This assumption, I contend, has obscured
the possibility that dependence on moral testimony need not be morally second-best—a
possibility we will then be in a position to explore more fully in Section 3.

\[^{141}\text{Crisp (2014, 142).}\]
2.1 Epistemic Limitations and Dependence on Moral Testimony

Here is a highlight reel of recent defenses of dependence on moral testimony. Eric Wiland writes of dependence on moral testimony:

It would be foolish and stubborn to always go it alone. Recognizing your own naiveté and limitations, you are wise to defer to those who know better. We should not undervalue the reasons for which some defer.\footnote{Wiland (2015, 176)}

Karen Jones writes:

While the virtuous person might not herself have all the capacities necessary for her virtue to lead to only right action, she will have appropriate self-assessment and appreciate the limits of her capacities. She will know when she needs the moral help of others.\footnote{Jones (1999, 77-78)}

David Enoch writes:

[A]s with all imperfections, once they are there, it is better to acknowledge them and act in a way that takes their existence into account. Deferring to a moral expert is sometimes a way of doing just that, and when it is, this is the way to go.\footnote{Enoch (2014, 258)}

And, finally, Paulina Sliwa writes:

Why can taking someone’s moral advice be a good thing? ...There are at least two good reasons for doing so: For one, we might be concerned that our own judgment is compromised by bias or self-interest. Secondly, we might think that the other person is just better at making certain moral judgments than we are.\footnote{Sliwa (2012, 179). Sliwa’s point in this passage is made in terms of moral advice. But since Sliwa argues that moral advice and moral testimony are of a kind, on her view what she says in this passage holds true of moral testimony, \textit{mutatis mutandis}. While I disagree with Sliwa that moral testimony and moral advice are of a kind (as I argue in Section 4 of Chapter I), it strikes me that one could make an argument for the non-remedial value of dependence on moral advice that closely parallels the argument that I give for the value of dependence on moral testimony (although I will not give such an argument).}
As is readily apparent, what all of these defenses have in common is that they all center on how our epistemic limitations work to justify our dependence on moral testimony.

Wiland’s own defense of dependence on moral testimony in these cases appeals to Rossian deontology. In the Rossian spirit, Wiland distinguishes between prima facie, “bare” duties (e.g., the duty not to make others suffer) and “more complex,” all-things-considered moral judgments (e.g., capital punishment is wrong) that rest upon multiple, often times competing, prima facie duties. Wiland, following Ross, claims that prima facie duties are self-evident to morally mature adults, and concludes from this that “deferring to another’s moral judgment about whether something is a prima facie duty is almost never a good idea for a healthy sane person to do.”146 However, Wiland concurs that some people are better able than others to make certain all-things-considered judgments, i.e., to weigh competing prima facie duties, because of their superior moral experiences. If then you judge that a testifier has a greater wealth of relevant moral experiences than you and so is in a better position to make sense of how prima facie duties conflict and combine, then you might justifiably depend on her testimony.

In a similar vein, Karen Jones appeals to the complexity of moral matters and the privileging role of moral experience in her defense of dependence on moral testimony. Although she does not put it in these terms, her central idea is that a sort of virtuous humility ultimately justifies dependence on moral testimony: in the face of a complicated “world of value,” mature moral agents are wise to recognize their own limited capacities and depend on the moral testimony of reliable others. The case for dependence, she argues, is strengthened by the importance of moral matters: “If it is so very bad to make a

146 Wiland (2015, 176).
moral mistake, it would take astonishing arrogance to suppose…a do-it-yourself approach.”

Like Jones, Enoch points to the potential consequences of going it alone in making moral judgments to defend dependence on moral testimony. He argues that if we truly think that some testifier is more likely than we are to be right on some moral matter, and it is a case in which we run the risk of wronging others, then we should defer to the testifier. In Enoch’s vernacular, going for “the gold”—that is, the ideal of acting with moral understanding—is not worth risking “the silver”—that is, avoiding acting in a morally wrong way.

Sliwa takes a very different tack to defend dependence on moral testimony. She lays out a number of cases of dependence on moral advice that are “intuitively unproblematic.” She suggests that these cases strike us as unproblematic when the advisee is biased or when she has good reason to think that the advisor’s judgment is sounder than her own. Sliwa then goes on to argue that moral advice and moral testimony are of a kind, and so many cases of dependence on moral testimony are also unproblematic.

Despite their differences, all of these views appeal to the same basic idea to defend dependence on moral testimony: it can be morally good for us to depend on moral testimony when we justifiably believe that others are epistemically better situated than we are with respect to the matter at hand. Recall Karen Jones’s Peter:

Peter: Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of

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147 Jones (1999, 67).

sexism and racism… Such blindness can sometimes indicate insincerity, but in Peter’s case it did not… He could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’ applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to non-egregious new cases. 

Jones argues that if Peter were to depend on his neighbors’ moral testimony to pick out non-egregious instances of sexism and racism (as she argues he should), he would be acting rightly and virtuously. She contends, “While the virtuous person might not herself have all the capacities necessary for her virtue to lead to only right action, she will have appropriate self-assessment and appreciate the limits of her capacities. She will know when she needs the moral help of others.” So Peter, in depending on his trusted neighbors’ moral testimony, might demonstrate admirable humility and self-awareness. He might even be in a sense wise to depend on moral testimony, as the passage from Wiland suggests, if his dependence is motivated by his own self-understanding. Even so, for Peter and all his real life counterparts, dependence on moral testimony is a remedial virtue; it is valuable only because it helps us to deal with the ways in which we are flawed, or the ways in which we have gone wrong or fallen short. It is in this sense that current defenses of dependence on moral testimony only go as far as to show that dependence is second-best.

It strikes me as immensely plausible that it is an important function of dependence on moral testimony that it can serve to remedy our epistemic limitations. Going optimist defenses have tended to focus on the value of one-off instances of dependence on moral testimony in serving this function. But the relationship between dependence on moral testimony

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150 Ibid. (77-78).
testimony and how it can serve to allay epistemic limitations is more complex than has generally been acknowledged by these defenses. A *disposition* to depend on moral testimony, like the one I defend in Section 3, can serve to mitigate our epistemic limitations and to prompt our moral growth in more substantive ways than one-off acts of dependence, particularly in the context of friendship.\(^{151}\) This idea has some deep intellectual roots. For example, consider what Marilyn Friedman writes:

> Friendship can be an invaluable source of…moral transformation… In friendship, there is a substantial measure of trust in the ability of our friends to bear what I call reliable ‘moral witness’ to their own experiences. Among friends, there is generally a mutual sharing of stories about past and present experiences… So long as our friends confide their experiences authentically, sensitively, and insightfully, we can gain knowledge of lives lived in accord with moral rules and values that differ from our own…. Friendship is a close relationship in which trust, intimacy, and disclosure open up for us whole standpoints other than our own. Through seeing what my friend counts as a harm done to her, for example, and seeing how she suffers from it and what she does in response, I can try on, as it were, her interpretive claim and its implications for moral practice.\(^{152}\)

In this passage, Friedman suggests that our friends, by sharing with us their moral experiences and outlooks, can play a vital part in our “moral transformation.” While Friedman does not write explicitly in terms of “dispositions” directed towards our friends, she does highlight that in friendship “there is generally a mutual sharing of stories about past and present experiences” and that we bear a “substantial measure of trust” towards our friends in the sharing of these stories. The spirit of Friedman’s point, here, can be aptly applied to a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony (even if she, herself, would not take her views to apply to dependence on moral testimony): a

\(^{151}\) My remarks, here, help bolster my claims in Section 3 of Chapter III about how dependence on moral testimony can be a route to moral understanding.

\(^{152}\) Friedman (1993, 196-198).
disposition to depend on moral testimony is as a good general strategy for addressing the broader fact that our “moral standpoints” are often skewed by our epistemic limitations (irrespective of the particulars of these limitations). So, while discrete acts of dependence on moral testimony may be valuable in the ways that optimists have contended that they are, their value may also be derivative on the value of a disposition to depend on moral testimony.

2.2 A New Entry Point into the Debate

So far as they go, I find the going defenses of dependence on moral testimony convincing, although I will not argue here for their success. But, as I argue in the next section, these defenses do not wholly capture the value of dependence on moral testimony; our epistemic limitations and the need to avoid moral error, while important, are not the only features of a situation that could justify dependence on moral testimony.

To begin to see this, note that we can be confronted with a bit of moral testimony even when we have not exhausted our own deliberations and even when we are not of the mind that others are better epistemically situated than we are regarding the matter at hand. That is, and in contrast to the cases presented in the literature up to this point, sometimes moral testimony is unsolicited, and finds us with our own views; and sometimes we solicit moral testimony prior to exhausting our own deliberations. Imagine: A co-worker, with whom you share all the relevant non-moral information, comes up to you after a department meeting and tells you that the prevailing workplace culture is hostile to minorities. You ask a dear friend to read over your e-mail to tell you if it is rude. In such
cases, even if you would be able to successfully deliberate on the relevant moral matter on your own, there remains the normative question of whether there is value in depending on the testifiers’ moral testimony.

I want to argue that to answer this question, and to more fully appreciate the topography of the moral status of dependence on moral testimony, we should, in part, think carefully about the varied relationships that might hold between hearers and testifiers. So far, writers on moral testimony have tended to proceed in their analyses under a very abstract understanding of dependence on moral testimony, rather than focusing on the different sorts of relationships within which such dependence takes place. To see this, consider, again, an example of moral testimony that’s taken as a paradigm case in the literature:¹⁰

**Vegetarian:** Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. She knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.¹⁵³

In this case, and in the vast run of other examples in the moral testimony literature, the testifier is a friend.¹⁵⁴ Why, if at all, does it matter whether the testifier in *Vegetarian* and in other cases is a friend? The reason is not made explicit in the literature, but we can readily discern it: if dependence on moral testimony is good because it can correct for our

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¹⁰ See, for example, Driver (2006), Groll and Decker (2014), Hills (2009 and 2010), McGrath (2011), and Sliwa (2012).

¹⁵³ This case is discussed by Hills (2009), McGrath (2009), and Sliwa (2012).

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, Groll and Decker’s (2014) example of Gregoire the cat-burner (69-70); Nickel’s (1999) *Rent Money* example (256) and his Sandia and Linda example (262); and Sliwa’s (2012) examples of *Suit* (176), *Wedding* (177), *Trip* (178), *Friends* (178), and *Rude* (180).
flaws and shortcomings, then the reason why the friendship matters in these cases is because we are more likely to be in a position with friends to see why they are reliable, or to see that defeaters are not present. For example, Eleanor needs to be in position to know about the testifier’s reliability in order that her dependence be epistemically sound, and presumably Eleanor would have more evidence of a friend’s rather than a stranger’s reliability. It appears, then, that philosophers who have written about moral testimony have assumed that it is not fundamentally important whether the relationship between the testifier and the hearer is impersonal or personal. That is, they have assumed that there is nothing essential to their arguments about the moral status of dependence on moral testimony whether these cases show up in a personal relationship; the testifier, be she a friend or a stranger, is most importantly an evidential source.

Of course we sometimes turn to the faceless voices of talk radio, philosophy blogs, and the like for a bit of moral guidance. And of course we also sometimes depend upon and take up the moral beliefs of social institutions (e.g., religious organizations, corporations, nations, etc.) and their leaders. But very often we depend on the moral testimony of our intimates—our mentors, our friends, our spouses, and so on. There remain to be asked substantive questions about whether and how these intimate relationships should affect our appraisal of dependence on moral testimony. I propose, then, that we look at cases of dependence on moral testimony that crop up in one important paradigm of intimate relationships, close friendships, and investigate how the relationship itself makes a difference, if at all, to the value of dependence on moral testimony.
In this section I will lay out my positive argument in defense of dependence on moral testimony: I will argue that friendship is not merely relevant in order to serve as evidence of testifiers’ reliability, but can itself make a difference to the value of dependence on moral testimony. More specifically, I will argue that there can be non-remedial value in having a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony.

Such a disposition is a belief-forming disposition. To have it is to have a sort of doxastic habit: under normal circumstances, when confronted with a testifier’s moral testimony a hearer with the relevant disposition will come to believe the testimony on the basis of the testifier’s say-so. Furthermore, it is a belief-forming disposition that is relationship-based. By this I mean that it is a disposition to depend on the moral testimony of the particular people with whom you are friends. It is not a disposition to depend on reliable people, who might just happen to turn out to also be your friends.\(^{155}\)

My argument for the value of this disposition has two main strands. First, I will argue that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be instrumentally valuable because dependence in friendship can be good for both those who depend and those who are depended upon. Second, by showing that reciprocal dependence can serve to express the trust that is constitutive of close friendships, I will argue that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be non-instrumentally valuable. To conclude

\(^{155}\) As I made explicit above, I am proceeding under the background assumption that our friends are in fact reliable. I will explore the question of whether the disposition to depend on our friends’ moral testimony is valuable when our friends are in fact unreliable in Chapter V.
this section, I will explain how my positive account is tied to moral testimony, in particular.

3.1 The Instrumental Value of Dependence on Friends’ Moral Testimony

There are at least three ways that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be instrumentally valuable that go beyond the epistemic advantages noted in the previous section. These ways come into sight when we look carefully at how dependence on friends’ moral testimony tends to benefit those who depend as well as those on whom they depend.

First, dependence on friends’ moral testimony, and more generally dependence on friends for goods, can promote the development and exercise of virtue. For those who depend it can, for example, occasion practices of gratitude, humility, and affection. For those who are depended upon it can encourage the development and exercise of other-regarding virtues. To see this, consider a parallel with beneficence: it is good to accept beneficent acts, in part, because it provides space for others to be benevolent, and so to exercise their virtue. If you refuse to accept favors or gifts, you block others from important moral opportunities. Similarly, if you refuse to depend on moral testimony, you block others from opportunities to provide you with the good of moral knowledge, and these opportunities are also morally important. They can, for example, occasion practices of generosity and conscientiousness.

Second, it can be good for testifiers to be depended upon for moral knowledge because it can prompt them to take more seriously their moral judgments by upping the
stakes, so to speak, for them as moral agents. If, for example, your friends are disposed to depend on your moral testimony, you might tend to make and express your moral judgments in a more nuanced and tempered manner than you otherwise might. After all, when your friends depend upon you by accepting your testimony, their beliefs, and the actions stemming from those beliefs, are traceable to you as the testifier.

Finally, it can be good for testifiers to be depended upon because it can have a galvanizing effect on how they see themselves as moral agents. Consider the following non-moral example: imagine that I take myself to be a good at tennis. My friend asks me to take up lessons and teach her to play, and so I do. Her voluntary dependence on my tennis playing and teaching skills might plausibly promote my self-confidence as a tennis player and coach, and engender a more positive self-image. Not only that, it might encourage me to see tennis as an even more important part of my life to which I want to devote even more time, thought, and care. In short, my friend, by trusting me to teach her the sport, might positively shape my own self-understanding. Similarly, when we depend on our friends’ moral testimony, our dependence can affect how they see themselves as moral agents. The impacts of this may in some cases be quite significant. Consider the following example from Thomas Hill:

THE SELF-DEPRECATOR: [H]e is reluctant to make demands. He says nothing when others take unfair advantage of him. When asked for his preferences or opinions, he tends to shrink away as if what he said should make no difference. His problem…is… an acute awareness of his own inadequacies and failures as an individual. These defects are not imaginary: he has in fact done poorly by his own standards and others’. But, unlike most of us in the same situation, he acts as if his failings warrant quite unrelated maltreatment even by strangers.156

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156 Hill (1973, 77-78).
Imagine that the self-deprecator is your friend and that you have developed a disposition to depend on his moral testimony. For this particular friend, your willingness to take on his moral outlook by being disposed to depend on his moral testimony could be a way to show him that you take him and his moral opinions seriously. And, for him, it is plausible to think that being taken seriously in this way would be of great importance; it might, for example, be pivotal in helping him to develop self-respect and also to develop as a moral agent more generally.

So to sum up: a disposition to depend a friend’s moral testimony can be instrumentally valuable because it can promote virtue in both those who depend and in those on whom they depend; because it can encourage those who are depended upon to be more careful in making and expressing their moral judgments; and, finally, because it can shape, perhaps in critically important ways, how those who are depended upon see themselves as moral agents.

However, there still remains the question of how, if at all, it matters to the instrumental value of the disposition that it is directed at friends. It strikes me that for each of the three ways that I have identified the disposition as instrumentally valuable, the importance of depending on friends, as opposed to just whoever turns out to be a reliable evidential source, matters for roughly the same reason. The reason, simply put, is that we care about our friends. So, for example, it is plausible to think the fact that it is a friend, as opposed to some stranger, who depends on our moral testimony will tend to positively impact the efforts we put into ensuring the accuracy of our testimony, since we have more reason to be concerned with the fallout that inaccurate testimony might have in our friends lives than in the lives of strangers, ceteris paribus. After all, because we
care for our friends, we want to do right by them and we do not want to let them down—and not just because we do not like to disappoint people (although that may be part of it), but because they are our friends.

3.2 The Non-Instrumental Value of Dependence on Friends’ Moral Testimony

Of course, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony does not always have the desirable results that I have drawn attention to. But, apart from the question of whether the disposition has good results, we can ask whether it has value in itself. My view is that it does: a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be non-instrumentally valuable as an expression of the trust that is partly constitutive of the ideal of friendship. To argue this, I first show that reciprocal dependence, generally, is one important way by which we express the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship. Then, I show that reciprocal dependence on friends for goods, and the good of moral knowledge in particular, can be constitutively valuable in friendship.

Dependence in friendship sometimes gets a bad rap, which might give rise to some initial hesitation towards my view. Just consider that relationships are often called out as dysfunctional by labeling them as “co-dependent” or “emotionally dependent.” But consider the following examples: Deb, who is a graduate student, gets encouragement to keep working from her friend, Joan, who regularly checks in with her about how her thesis is progressing; Darren uses his friend John’s donated blood for his transfusion therapy; Jane, who is shy and introverted, gets help from her friend, Mary, in navigating social engagements; Lynne relies on her friend, Neal, to watch over her house when she
These examples, I take it, provide illustration of a couple of important things. First, they suggest that dependence in friendships is utterly common. While common, however, the nature of dependence in friendship is varied. We depend on our friends in mundane, everyday contexts, in which the stakes of our dependence are relatively low. But we also depend on them at momentous periods in our lives, when the stakes of our dependence are exceedingly high.

Second, the above examples illustrate that sometimes we depend on friends for goods that we could, at least in some sense, provide for ourselves. For example, Deb could download an app that helps her to manage her writing schedule; Darren could use blood from an anonymous donor; Jane could buy some self-help books and try her own hand making introductions as parties; and Lynne could install an alarm system or ask a watchful neighbor to keep tabs on her house. That is, we often depend on our friends even when we could eradicate our dependence on them.

And while sometimes we reduce our dependence on friends, the idea of removing dependence wholesale should be troubling. The dependencies in the examples, and many of the dependencies in our own lives and friendships, seem to themselves be good. That we often see acts of dependence as important milestones in friendship bolsters this intuition. Consider the following: Bess is planning to attend an out-of-state conference for work. Her friend, Jeannine, who she met at her previous place of employment, lives nearby the convention center and hotel where the conference is being held. Bess’s work is willing to cover her hotel expenses, but rather than reserving a hotel room, Bess decides to stay with Jeannine. We can readily imagine that this arrangement—Bess’s travels.
chosen dependence on Jeannine for accommodations—marks a sort of turning point in Bess and Jeannine’s relationship; they now begin to see each other as the sorts of close friends who open their homes to each other and who visit each other, even if that entails traveling cross-country.

The intuition that it is good to depend on our friends gets further support by imagining a friendship that was once characterized by a high level of mutual dependence, but now is marked by increasing independence of one another. We might say of such a friendship that the friends had become “distant,” or that they had “grown apart.” Imagine what we would think about individuals who, without any pressing need, attempted to remove all dependencies on their friends for goods. In some instances, attempting to eradicate particular dependencies seems unproblematic. If I decide I want to take up baking, it may be perfectly fine for me to halt depending on my friend to supply me with delicious baked goods. But to adopt the aim of becoming entirely independent of friends’ good will for good things seems at odds with being in a friendship, especially an ideal one.

So it looks like it is good to depend on our friends. But why? In large part, it is good to depend on friends because by doing so we express our trust in them. Dependence can be related to trust in other complex and interesting ways that are also valuable in friendship. For example, by depending on our friends we can build trust in the relationships. However, I will restrict my focus here to dependence as an expression of trust, which I take to be one of the key roles that dependence plays in friendship.

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vulnerable to Mary leading her astray in the ways of social graces; Lynne is vulnerable to Neal neglecting to care for her most prized possessions. By choosing to depend on our friends we choose to make ourselves vulnerable to them. After all, our friends could fail to deliver what we depend on them for. And choosing to make ourselves vulnerable to our friends is an expression of our trust in them.

So, being disposed to depend on our friends is an important way by which we express our trust in them. And trust, it strikes me, is a core, constitutive element of an ideal of friendship. By this, I do not just mean that it is central to friendship to regard one’s friend as trustworthy. Just as you can judge something valuable without valuing it, you can view someone as trustworthy without trusting him. I might judge that my co-worker’s spouse is trustworthy because she (who I know to be reliable) has told me story after story in which he shows up as a trustworthy and dependable person. But though I think well of him, that does not mean I trust him; if I have not met him, for example, it does not seem that our lives are entangled enough and in the ways that trust seems to require. It is trusting—and not just merely judging to be trustworthy—that I take to be so central to friendship. Nor, when I say that trusting, in this sense, is constitutive of the ideal of friendship, do I mean to engage in the project of giving a reductive analysis of friendship. Indeed, I am happy to allow that good and true friendships can withstand lapses of trust. What I am contending is that trusting, as an ideal of friendship, can serve to guide us in how we conduct our friendships.

Of course, we can go too far in depending on our friends and intimates. Consider, for example, Hill’s infamous example of the deferential housewife.

**Deferential Wife:** This is a woman who is utterly devoted to serving her husband. She buys the clothes he prefers, invites the guests he wants to
entertain, and makes love whenever he is in the mood. She willingly moves to a new city in order for him to have a more attractive job, counting her own friendships and geographical preferences insignificant by comparison...[S]he tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals; and, when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband’s.  

Among the many things that are troubling about this example, two are particularly relevant to the topic at hand. First, part of what seems so disturbing about the wife’s deference to her husband is how far-reaching it is; the wife depends on her husband not only for material comforts but also to decide her own “interests, values, and ideals.”

She depends on him to such an extent that she has become, as Hill suggests, servile. Extensive dependence on our friends could also lead to other moral failings, such as laziness. So to say that dependence on friends is valuable is not to say that it should be pursued to the extreme. It is also not to say that it is the only thing that is of value; indeed, the value of dependence should be situated and pursued alongside other, sometimes competing, values (e.g., the value of independence).

A second reason the Deferential Wife case is troubling is because the dependence in the case is so one-sided. This suggests that for dependence to play a role in constituting the ideal of friendship, it must be reciprocal, so that there is not massive inequality between friends. This reciprocity of dependence should not merely be understood quantitatively, but also qualitatively. We can imagine, for example, that the husband in this case depends on his wife for all sorts of things, e.g., his meals, a clean house, and weather reports. Even so, the dependence in their relationship is still grossly

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158 Hill (1973, 89).

159 I will return to examine this aspect of the example in greater detail in the next chapter, when I discuss the question of whether there are autonomy-related limits on the value of disposition to depend on friends’ moral testimony.
imbalanced, because the husband depends on his wife only in ways that are, relative to her dependence, trivial.

One-sided dependence can signal a departure from the ideal of friendship, and in particularly extreme cases, such as in Hill’s D E F E R E N T I A L W I F E case, it might actually lead to an utter breakdown of the friendship. Here, an analogy with beneficence is again apt. As Kant writes, “The relation of friendship is a relation of equality. A friend who bears my losses becomes my benefactor and puts me in his debt. I feel shy in his presence and cannot look him boldly in the face. The true relationship is cancelled and friendship ceases.”¹⁶⁰ Imagine two benevolent friends who, by reciprocally adopting each other’s interests, shore up their friendship. The friendship may well withstand a temporary foundering of this reciprocity, if for some reason—maybe one of the friends becomes sick, or takes on a big project at work—the beneficence becomes temporarily one-sided.¹⁶¹ But if the collapse of reciprocity were more drastic and long-lasting, it might end the friendship as such.

So, to sum up: reciprocal dependence is one important way we can express the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship. But as the D E F E R E N T I A L W I F E case illustrates, that trust is a constitutive element of the ideal of friendship does not mean that every expression of trust is thereby good. It might be pointed out, then, that even granting that reciprocal dependence in friendship is valuable in the ways that I have contended, this does not yet show that dependence on moral testimony can be constitutively valuable

¹⁶⁰ Kant (1963, 204-205).

¹⁶¹ Note that even in such cases, the history of reciprocity might still be at work; we often say when we care for friends when they are sick or overburdened something along the lines of, “You’d do it for me.”
for friendship. In other words, why should we think that a particular type of dependence—i.e., dependence on a friend’s moral testimony—is valuable?

Note that the intuitively good examples of dependence from the beginning of this section all involve depending on friends for things that are valuable (i.e., extra accountability in work, medical treatment, social graces, and protection of property). Contrast this with co-dependence: codependents depend on one another to prop up unhealthy or immoral behaviors (e.g., addition, abuse, etc.). This difference suggests a way to carve out the types of dependence that are valuable: depending on our friends for goods is valuable as one important way we can express trust which is constitutive of the ideal of friendship. And, since moral knowledge is a good, then depending on our friends for moral knowledge—i.e., depending on their moral testimony—can express the trust which is constitutive of the ideal of friendship.

But, even if we grant that reciprocal dependence on moral testimony can be constitutively valuable in friendship, we might still wonder if people could be great friends and yet not depend on each other for the good of moral knowledge, so long as they depended on one another for other goods. My response to this line of thinking is two-fold. First, due to the centrality of moral knowledge to our agency and our ways of seeing the world it strikes me as plausible that moral knowledge is indeed privileged in such a way that the ideal of friendship would be undermined by friends failing to be disposed to depend on one another’s moral testimony. Consider the following example from Troy Jollimore:

RUDE COMMENT: Suppose, for instance, that Agnes is told by a third party that her friend Brad was unacceptably rude to Phil. Brad’s account of the event is that he was only responding to some comments Phil made—comments that Brad interpreted as rude and insulting. Had she been
present and witnessed the exchange, Agnes would have been able to judge for herself whether Phil’s comments were indeed rude and whether Brad’s response was reasonable and justified. But Agnes was not present, and so she had to rely on the testimony of those who were—including, of course, the testimony of Brad himself.\footnote{Jollimore (2011, 64). On Jollimore’s view, it is because Agnes knows Brad’s character that she is justified in depending on his testimony.}

Now picture the many other similar situations involving moral testimony like this that are likely to crop up in Agnes and Brad’s friendship; for example, Brad testifying to Agnes about his sister’s generosity, about the sexism in a recent advertising campaign, about the importance of fossil fuel divestment. If Agnes were not disposed to depend on Brad’s moral testimony, and instead remained agnostic about his moral testimony across the board until she formed opinions on her own, we might think of her as lacking the sort of trust that is essential to the ideal of friendship.\footnote{Again, I am operating under the assumption that epistemic conditions are ideal (Agnes knows Brad to be reliable, she doesn’t have any defeaters for believing his testimony, etc.).}

But even if moral knowledge is not privileged in this way—even if people could in fact be great friends without having the disposition I have defended—my point that dependence on moral testimony can have non-remedial value would not be undermined. For the fact that there is more than one way to express the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship does not at all cut against the view that one of these ways has positive value. Here is a simple illustration of this basic point: that there are multiple good ways to make delicious bread does not make any of them non-valuable as ways of making bread. As I showed above, going optimist defenses of dependence on moral testimony do not ascribe positive, non-remedial value to dependence at all. So even if reciprocal dependence on moral testimony is not essential to the ideal of friendship, that does not
undermine the fact that the view I have put forth and defended shows that dependence on moral testimony can have positive, non-remedial value at least in some friendships.

3.3 *Moral Testimony as an Invitation to Depend*

The non-remedial value of the disposition that I have argued for is, I take it, most relevant in cases in which our friends’ moral testimony is addressed to us, and addressed to us in such a way as to function as an invitation to accept the testimony just based on their say-so. Unpacking this point will help make clear how and why my account is tied to getting moral knowledge by way of moral testimony, in particular.

Let me explain. Philosophers writing about dependence on moral testimony have, in general, exhibited a tendency to treat such dependence as just a standard case of moral deference. These philosophers hold that there is nothing special, normatively-speaking, about testimony. One such prominent view on the current scene is that of epistemic pessimist Sarah McGrath. She writes:

> Although it is sometimes claimed that there is something strange about moral testimony… any such strangeness is a case of a more general phenomenon. While testimony is a particularly common and salient route by which we learn the moral views of others, there are, of course, other routes. Suppose that you actively attempt to conceal your opposition to capital punishment from me, perhaps out of an overzealous desire not to interfere with the exercise of my own autonomous moral judgment. Nevertheless, I discover that you strongly disapprove of capital punishment—perhaps by observing your involuntary grimaces whenever others mention the practice in your presence. As a result, I adopt your strongly negative attitude as my own. On the face of it, this seems no less (and no more) odd than a case in which I defer to you about the morality of capital punishment after learning of your view on the basis of testimony.\(^\text{164}\)

\(^{164}\) McGrath (2011, 115).
Here, McGrath claims that in our evaluative analyses we should treat an agent’s deference to another just the same if the agent discovers her belief by accident as if the testifier states her belief for the purpose of convincing the agent. On McGrath’s view, whatever we conclude about the moral and epistemic status of moral testimony, in particular, will apply to moral deference, in general.

Clearly, to depend on moral testimony is to defer to someone else’s say-so. But to simply lump dependence on moral testimony together with other types of moral deference for the purposes of normative inquiry, as McGrath has done, is to ignore the pragmatic texture of address. As I pointed out in Chapter I, some philosophers have defended the view that address is necessary for a speech act to even count as an instance of testimony, while others have denied this even though they allow that some cases of testimony involve address. My account is consistent with the views of both of these camps: whether address is part of the best analysis of testimony, or whether it is just a contingent feature of a subset of cases of testimony, my view is just the disposition I have defended is a disposition to depend on testimony that is addressed to you by a friend. Even more specifically, it is a disposition to depend on testimony that is addressed to us in such a way as to function as an invitation to accept the testimony just based on the testifier’s say-so.

When people address us, they might be doing a number of different things. At one extreme, it seems that sometimes when people tell us things they aren’t even trying to present the content of their assertion as evidence at all. Imagine that your spouse comes home after a rough day and, in telling you about her day, she dishes out all sorts of juicy moral assessments about her coworkers and clients. This may, to an outsider, look like a
case of straightforward moral testimony, but you may well know, depending on the circumstances, that your partner is just venting: her tellings are expressive and therapeutic, and she intends for you to listen without updating your credences, commitments, or actions in any way based on what she says.

In contrast, people often tell us things expressly in an attempt to get us to update our credences. Even here, they may do so in a way that does not invite us to defer to their say-so: sometimes they intend to do so by way of facilitating our own autonomous judgment. As Elizabeth Anscombe writes, “In teaching philosophy we do not hope that our pupils will believe us, but rather, that they will come to see that what we say is true—if it is.” So, in teaching philosophy, we are merely offering up the content of our assertions as evidence.

This is sometimes the way it goes with moral testimony: one way to think about what my partner is doing when he tells me that “eating meat is cruel,” assuming that he and I share all the same non-moral information (e.g., about the conditions under which livestock is kept, etc.), is that he is trying to get me to see for myself the wrongness of eating meat under some thick moral description. That is, he is merely inviting me to see the immorality of eating meat for myself, and not asking me to place my confidence in him. This picture of testimony, it’s worth noting, is often the version at issue with the exchange of solicited testimony. And maybe also in cases of unsolicited testimony, depending on speaker intent.

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165 Anscombe (1979, 145). We can draw even more fine-grained distinctions than Anscombe does here, by distinguishing among genuinely presenting evidence in an impartial way and presenting evidence with the hope that the person will adopt a particular view.

166 And maybe also in cases of unsolicited testimony, depending on speaker intent.
own lights and, in order to do so, we’re turning to imaginative intimates to help us consider possibilities that we, ourselves, wouldn’t have otherwise dreamt up.

Alternatively, though, part of what our interlocutors may be doing in addressing their testimony to us is inviting us to give uptake to their testimony by taking their say-so as sufficient reason for belief. Testifiers often indicate this by prefacing their statements with, for example, “Trust me…” as in, “Trust me, you don’t want to know him any better.” It is in these sorts of cases—cases in which we are, in effect, invited to depend—that we’re most likely to encounter the value of dependence that I’ll defend, value that goes beyond merely correcting for our epistemic limitations and that makes for what we might call “first-best” dependence.

It makes a normative difference whether we take up others’ moral views in response to their invitation to depend or just because we incidentally gleaned their views from an encounter. Consider this example: I observe that my spouse is concerned about the health of our dog, but he doesn’t tell me because he doesn’t want me to worry. Somehow, I rightly gather that this is what he thinks, and since we have the means, we have a responsibility to seek out veterinary care for our dog. Even if my spouse were to find out that I knew of his concern, since he endeavors to protect me from worry it would be a bit funny if he were to feel upset if I didn’t adopt his attitude. Now imagine that my spouse explicitly tells me that he is concerned about our dog’s condition, and that he thinks that as conscientious pet owners we must visit a specialist. In this case my spouse might reasonably feel insult or resentment if I refuse to, in some way, give uptake to his concerns (say, by paying closer attention to our dog’s behavior or by setting up an appointment at the vet)—partly, perhaps, because he thinks I should care about the health
of our dog, but also because they are *his* concerns and he has addressed them to *me*. We can imagine, I think, that if this instance played into a pattern of behavior on my part, if I regularly refused my spouse’s invitations to take up his concerns and moral views on his say-so, that it might harm our relationship. As I have argued, it can be valuable to the relationship for us to depend on our friends for moral knowledge, but there can be added normative import when we depend on them for moral knowledge by way of their moral testimony, in particular. For if we refuse to take up friends’ moral views in response to their moral testimony, when their testimony functions as an invitation to accept what they say just based on their say-so, we risk treating them poorly and undermining our relationships in a way that we do not when our friends are not addressing their moral views to us at all.

4. **Epistemic Partiality, Doxastic Voluntarism, and Practical Reasons for Belief**

It has rightly occurred to many philosophers that intimate relationships place special demands upon us, and that the norms of friendship can and should be, in some sense, practically authoritative. As Scanlon writes, “A person who values friendship will take herself to have reasons, first and foremost, to do those things that are involved in being a good friend: to be loyal, to be concerned with her friends’ interests, to try to stay in touch, to spend time with her friends, and so on.”[^167] However, while philosophers have written extensively on how intimate relationships affect us as *doers*, far less attention has been paid to the topic, in general terms, of this chapter: the unique ways in which these

relationships affect us as knowers. However, there are a few notable exceptions to this claim. There is a small but growing literature on epistemic partiality that focuses on how our doxastic practices are shaped by our friendships, the general topic of concern in this chapter. In this section, I will present three defenses of epistemic partiality in friendship and show how they differ from my view. In part, my view is distinctive because of its focus on dispositions. I will argue that because of this, my view is well-equipped to respond to worries—i.e., worries about doxastic voluntarism and the “wrong kinds of reasons” for belief—to which going epistemic partiality views are vulnerable.

4.1 Epistemic Partiality

Sarah Stroud and Troy Jollimore have each defended the basic idea that good friendship involves not only good motives and positive feelings directed towards our friends, but also favorable epistemic practices: we must, on their views, endeavor to see our friends in a good light.\textsuperscript{168} For example, friendship can require of us that we are somewhat insensitive to our friends’ faults and that we are acutely aware of their positive attributes. Jollimore explains his view as follows:

\begin{quote}
My view is not merely that love alters one’s way of seeing but that love itself is, in large part, a way of seeing—a way of seeing one’s beloved, and also a way of seeing the world. On the level of common sense, this seems to me unassailable. One does not see one’s beloved, or anyone about whom one has significant feeling, in the flat, distracted manner in which one tends to see most strangers. She occupies a special place at or near the center of one’s attention; she has one’s attention from the moment she enters a room. (If she does not, then we must wonder whether the love is still alive.) The lover notices things about his beloved—tiny, easily
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{168} See Stroud (2006) and Jollimore (2011). Preston-Roedder (2013) also argues along these lines, but he argues that we should endeavor to extend favorable epistemic practices to everyone as part of having the moral virtue of faith in humanity.
overlooked, but meaningful attributes—that would escape the notice of others. Yet at the same time there may be things about her that escape his notice of that he positively refuses to notice or dwell on. He appreciates, fully and generously, her better qualities and ignores, refuses to acknowledge, or at the very least deemphasizes her less-than-ideal attributes. Like any way of seeing, love is perspectival, meaning that some things are focused on and placed at the center of one’s field of view, whereas others, if they are perceived at all, are relegated to the periphery.\textsuperscript{169}

On Stroud and Jollimore’s views, when a good friend encounters evidence that casts doubt on her friend’s character, she will \textit{prima facie} tend to play down or ignore the evidence or to put a positive spin on it.

Simon Keller argues that in good friendships we extend partial doxastic practices to how we view our friends’ projects. Consider Keller’s central case:

\textbf{POETRY READING:} Rebecca is scheduled to give a poetry reading at a café. She is nervous about reading her poetry in public, but has decided to do it on this occasion because she knows that a certain literary agent will be present and she knows that her work might catch his attention. She lets her good friend Eric know that she’ll be giving the reading, and asks whether he’d mind coming along to be in the audience. Eric, as it happens, is a regular visitor to the café, and has over time accumulated strong evidence for his belief that poetry read there is almost always mediocre, and that it’s very unlikely that anything read there would make any literary agent take notice. He has not known that Rebecca fancies herself as a poet, and has no familiarity with her work. But he is her friend, and he makes sure that he’s there for the reading.\textsuperscript{170}

About this case, Keller claims that even if Eric would be justified on epistemic grounds in believing that the poetry would read at the café will likely be bad, as a good friend he ought not to believe that about Rebecca’s poetry.

How is my view different from those of Stroud, Jollimore, and Keller? For one, their views principally concern how friendship normatively shapes how and what we

\textsuperscript{169} Jollimore (2011, 4).

\textsuperscript{170} Keller (2004, 331-332).
believe about our friends (their characters and their projects), while my view is about how friendship normatively shapes how we believe about the world. Note that in the passage above Jollimore countenances the possibility that “love alters one’s way of seeing… the world,” and elsewhere he writes:

To see with love’s vision is… to see the rest of the world, to some degree, through [the beloved’s] eyes, to allow his values, judgments, and emotions to have an effect on your perceptions, similar, in important ways, to the effect they have on his.  

However, beyond these couple, brief remarks, Jollimore remains focused on how friendship normatively shapes how and what we believe about our friends.

I could believe well of my friend, while not depending on her moral testimony. I could, for example, judge her to have an upstanding moral character, to be totally trustworthy in some domain of moral knowledge, to be moral in the choice and pursuit of her projects—thereby satisfying the norms defended by Stroud, Jollimore, and Keller—and still, for a variety of reasons, fail to have the disposition I have here defended. Conversely, I could also fail to satisfy the norms that Stroud, Jollimore, and Keller defend and yet be disposed to depend on my friend’s moral testimony. Recall the POETRY READING case. Now, imagine that heading into the reading, because of the evidence he has about the caliber of poetry that’s usually read at the café, Eric believes that Rebecca’s poetry will probably be crummy. Further imagine that while many of Rebecca’s friends see her as insatiably curious and refreshingly free-spirited since she always seems to be taking up new and varied projects like poetry writing and reading, Eric tends to see Rebecca as scattered and unfocused. Presumably, Eric fails to have the beliefs and belief-forming methods that Keller argues are involved in good friendship, since he’s skeptical.

about Rebecca’s project. It also looks like he fails to have the beliefs and belief-forming methods that Stroud and Jollimore commend, since he sees Rebecca herself in an unflattering light. Still, it might be the case that Eric thinks that taking up one another’s moral perspectives is an essential part of friendship, and even for all his other unflattering beliefs about Rebecca he nevertheless believes that she is morally decent, so he is disposed to depend on her moral testimony.

But even if my view is not fundamentally about how we believe about our friends and their projects, it might be wondered if my view nevertheless commits me to a version of epistemic partiality along the lines of the accounts defended by Stroud, Jollimore, and Keller. One might think, for example, that you can’t sustain a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony without certain other belief-dispositions about your friend; for example, you have to believe that your friend is a decent person and that she is sufficiently reliable, or at least not believe that she is unreliable. But recall that in keeping with the extant literature on moral testimony, I have up to this point defended dependence on moral testimony under the assumption that hearers are justified in thinking that testifiers are in fact reliable. I have been concerned to respond to practical pessimists who hold that even under such epistemically idealized conditions dependence on moral testimony is problematic, and to optimists who hold that dependence is second-best. It’s an interesting question about whether or not the disposition I have defended has value outside of such idealized conditions, and one I will address in the next chapter. However, the view I’ve defended up to this point is consistent with both the affirmation and denial of Stroud, Jollimore, and Keller’s views—which is to say that their views, while having affinities with my own, are orthogonal to it.
4.2 *Doxastic Voluntarism*

At least some versions of epistemic partiality are potentially subject to the charge that they are committed to doxastic voluntarism, a view according to which agents are posited as having the ability to believe by direct acts of will. Many philosophers have argued against doxastic voluntarism, often noting that, among other things, it doesn’t seem to match the phenomenology of belief.\(^{172}\) For example, recall Keller’s POETRY READING case. Of that case Keller writes, “If some stranger were about to give the reading, then Eric would believe that the poetry he is about to hear will probably be pretty awful.” But, since he is Rebecca’s friend, Eric “ought not, before she takes the stage, have those beliefs about her.”\(^{173}\) It looks like Keller is claiming that Eric ought to refrain from having particular beliefs. Such a claim, coupled along with one plausible understanding of an ought-implies-can principle, entails that Eric can refrain from having particular beliefs; that is, it entails a commitment to doxastic voluntarism.

Because of the affinities between my view and those of epistemic partialists such as Keller—e.g., my view, like Keller’s, is focused on intimate relationships and how they shape our doxastic practices—it might be thought that I am committed to doxastic voluntarism. But I need not take on a commitment to doxastic voluntarism (nor deny that ought implies can), because what I am concerned to defend is the value of a certain *disposition*—namely, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony. I am not defending the value of particular acts of believing particular pieces of moral testimony, and so not arguing that one should choose to believe some particular bit of moral

\(^{172}\) See, for example, Adler (2002) and Audi (2001).

\(^{173}\) Keller (2004, 332).
testimony on some particular occasion in order to realize this value. For agents to cultivate the disposition I have argued to be valuable it is not necessary that they have direct control over their beliefs. Rather, all that is required is that agents can develop tendencies to form beliefs on the basis of certain considerations in certain contexts. We take steps to develop these tendencies all the time. For example, when I hike I will myself to pay closer attention to my surroundings so as to develop a more acute disposition to consciously recognize danger.

4.3 “Wrong Kinds of Reasons”

My focus on dispositions also equips my view with the tools to avoid another worry that might be levied against epistemic partiality views, namely the worry that they appeal to the “wrong kind of reasons” for belief. Consider Joseph Raz’s distinction between what he calls “adaptive” and “practical” reasons: adaptive reasons for belief are marked by “the appropriateness of an attitude in the agent independently of the value of having that attitude” while practical reasons “are value-related” and “taken together, determine what and how, in light of the value of things, we should change or preserve in ourselves or the world.” Some philosophers have argued that the only rational reasons for belief are adaptive in Raz’s sense. The above worry about doxastic voluntarism can be seen as one version of a wrong kind of reasons worry: since it doesn’t seem that we have direct control over our beliefs, there cannot be practical reasons for belief. But there are other versions, as well. Some claim that the aim of belief is truth, and so there cannot be

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Raz (2009, 46).
practical reasons for belief. As Stroud puts the worry: “that someone is your friend is not itself a relevant epistemic reason (as we might put it) to form different beliefs about him than you would about anyone else.”

Stroud herself just bites this bullet; she argues the fact that someone is our friend does give us epistemic reasons and simply admits, “In numerous respects, then, the doxastic stance of the good friend seems eminently subject to epistemic criticism.” However, she suggests that the clash between her view and mainstream epistemological views is more an indication that there is something wrong with those epistemological views than an indication that there cannot be practical reasons for belief.

But I need not enter into this debate to take a stand on whether or not there can be practical reasons for belief, for I’m not claiming, strictly speaking, that there are practical reasons for belief. Indeed, to reiterate: my central claim is that there are practical reasons to develop a certain belief-forming disposition, namely a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony. And, as my example above about hiking pointed to, it’s quite commonplace that we can and should exert direct, voluntary control over actions which have foreseeable consequences for our habits of belief—which is to say that there are practical reasons to cultivate belief-forming dispositions.

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175 See, for example, Adler (2002) and Shah (2006).
177 Ibid. (514).
5. **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the value of dependence on moral testimony is not only grounded in the ways that such dependence can serve to remedy our epistemic limitations, but also in the ways in which such dependence, by expressing trust, can be constitutive of friendship. On my view, then, dependence on moral testimony can have non-remedial value. To defend dependence on moral testimony, I argued for the value of a disposition; not only does the focus on dispositions seem to match the phenomenology of dependence in friendship, but it also has the theoretical advantage of providing my view with the resources to eschew some of the epistemological criticisms to which epistemic partiality views seem liable.
CHAPTER V

THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF THE NON-REMEDIAL VALUE OF DEPENDENCE ON MORAL TESTIMONY

In the preceding chapter I argued for the non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony. More specifically, I advanced the view that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be valuable as an expression of the trust that is constitutive of the ideal of friendship. In this chapter, I will investigate the scope and limits of the value of such a disposition.

To do so, I will examine two forms of skepticism regarding the value of a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony. The first form of skepticism hinges on concerns about the reliability of testifiers. Up to this point, I have assumed that the cases in question are epistemically idealized, and so I have proceeded under the assumption that we know our friends are reliable testifiers. What happens if we abandon this assumption? What happens, for example, if we are uncertain as to the reliability of our friends, or if we have doubts about their reliability? Some might argue that in these cases, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony would be epistemically irrational since it might yield unjustified moral beliefs. It also might be argued that since

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178 You could have doubts about a friend’s reliability, and yet still justifiably believe that she’s more reliable than you are. I am not talking about this sort of case (since, presumably, being disposed to depend on a friend who is more reliable than you are, even if you have doubts about her reliability, looks epistemically promising), but cases in which your doubts are such that you worry that your friend is more likely to lead you astray than if you were to go it alone, so to speak.
the content of these beliefs is *moral*, such a disposition is criticizable on moral grounds; it might be thought that it is morally irresponsible to depend on the moral testimony of friends when we are uncertain or have doubts about their reliability, since in doing so we unduly risk taking on false moral beliefs and, on the basis of those beliefs, acting in morally bad ways.

The second form of skepticism hinges on concerns about autonomy. Some might worry that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony involves an objectionable ceding of moral agency. According to a strong version of this sort of skepticism, we ought never to depend on moral testimony; G.E.M. Anscombe explains this line of thinking as follows:

>This view might be maintained in connection with that autonomy of the will about which Kant wrote. To take one's morality from someone else - that, it might be held, would make it not morality at all; if one takes it from someone else, that turns it into a bastard sort of morality, marked by heteronomy.179

According to a weaker form of this sort of skepticism, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony ought to be constrained to certain types of beliefs. While such a disposition might be valuable, its scope should be limited: there are some moral beliefs, beliefs that we might describe as central moral beliefs, that should be fully ours in a way precludes depending on moral testimony.

My purposes in this chapter are exploratory. My aim is not to dismiss entirely the concerns raised by these skeptics, because I agree that some of these concerns do shape the sort of disposition to depend on moral testimony that we ought to cultivate. Nor do I intend to offer anything like a general solution to the problem of the extent to which we

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179 Anscombe (1981, 45).
should or should not cultivate a disposition to depend on moral testimony in the face of these concerns. Rather, my aim is, more modestly, to bring into relief key issues surrounding the scope and limits of the value of a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony. This will involve, in part, showing how some of these skeptical worries are mistaken, but it will also involve highlighting the most fertile grounds for staking a claim to the limits of the value of dependence on moral testimony.

1. **The Problem of Unreliable Testifiers**

As I noted above, in defending the non-remedial value of a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony I have proceeded under the assumption that we know our friends are reliable in relevant respects. But, in reality, we are not always in a position to know this. Evidence of a friend’s reliability may not be readily available to us, as when the friendship is relatively new. And surely our friends can be unreliable with respect to moral matters, sometimes in subtle and troubling ways. There remains the question, then, of whether we should direct a disposition to depend on moral testimony at our friends in cases in which we are uncertain or have doubts their reliability.

Note that however we answer this question, the view I defended so far is consistent with believing that we should be disposed to depend on a friend’s moral testimony *only* when we know that she is reliable, or least as reliable as we are. So even if it turns out that we should not depend on the moral testimony of friends about whose unreliability we are unsure, this is not by itself a good reason to deny that there is non-remedial value in depending on moral testimony. So to engage with the problem of
unreliable testifiers, as I have called it, is not to confront the question of whether or not dependence on moral testimony can be valuable, but instead to explore the limits of the value of such dependence.

In this section, I will explore two proposals for thinking that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony should be limited to cases in which we know the friend to be reliable, one that appeals to epistemic irrationality and one that appeal to moral irresponsibility.

1.1 The Problem

Before doing so, however, allow me to make a couple remarks in order to clarify the problem of unreliable testifiers. To start, note that how far the disposition I have defended can result in epistemically irrational beliefs is limited by the fact that some belief-forming dispositions are practically impossible. For example, assuming doxastic involuntarism, we cannot readily will ourselves to form a disposition to believe testifiers who we take to be transparently unreliable in a general sense (unless one takes some of the pills that Parfit describes in *Reasons and Persons*).\(^{180}\) If we take a testifier to be locally unreliable (e.g., unreliable only in certain contexts, or about particular matters), even if we could develop a disposition to depend on her moral testimony, it seems practically impossible that the disposition could be manifested in those circumstances relevant to the testifier’s local unreliability.

\(^{180}\) Parfit (1984).
This last point reminds us that it is important to keep in mind that the value I have been defending is the value of a disposition. You could have a disposition do depend on a friend’s moral testimony, and yet not end up believing the friend in given cases because your presumption belief in what she says is overridden, perhaps because you become aware of undefeated defeaters, for example.

1.2 Epistemic Irrationality

Some might argue that in cases in which we are uncertain or have doubts about a friend’s reliability we should not be disposed to depend on her moral testimony because, since the disposition could yield unjustified moral beliefs, or an unacceptably high proportion of unjustified moral beliefs, it is epistemically irrational.

In response to this line of thinking, let me first note that it is not clear that, from an epistemic perspective, that less epistemically risky dispositions are preferable. To see why this is so, consider from a third-person point of view two people, one of whose dispositions to depend on friends’ moral testimony are more epistemologically exacting and the other whose dispositions are less so. There is no clear reason to say that it is preferable, epistemically speaking, to be the first person rather than the second.

For one, there are opportunity costs associated with developing epistemically exacting standards for depending on moral testimony. We are finite beings with limited time and cognitive resources, and there are opportunity costs associated with seeking out and appreciating evidence. It is an open question whether or not the resources we might spend in trying to examine additional evidence regarding the reliability of testifiers might
be better spent devoted to other epistemic endeavors.

Furthermore, if we simply assume that the most exacting epistemological standards are the best, then we risk impugning many widely accepted epistemic practices. Imagine, for example, what such high standards might demand of us in order to depend on memory: we would have to double-check, and triple-check, and so-on, our memory by, for example, conferring with others. But then we would have to double-check, and triple-check, and so-on their reliability. Not only would such incredibly exacting standards monopolize our limited cognitive and practical resources, they might ultimately lead us to an inescapable skepticism.

Finally, even if we set aside this point about opportunity costs, a more epistemologically exacting disposition might not be epistemically preferable depending on the prevalence of misleading evidence. If misleading evidence abounds, then gathering more evidence might in fact be a less truth-conducive strategy than adopting a less evidentially rigorous belief-forming disposition.

But even if we grant that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony is epistemically irrational, from a moral perspective it still might be valuable to adopt it. More epistemologically exacting dispositions are not clearly preferable from a moral perspective, and they may in fact be morally problematic. If your spouse tells you that she is not cheating on you, you could look for further evidence of the reliability of her testimony by hiring a private investigator to tail her, opening her mail, and so on. But such evidence gathering methods would, at least in normal circumstances, demonstrate a morally objectionable amount of distrust.

Of course, it might be thought that even granting this point, what it shows is not
that there is a problem with epistemologically exacting standards, but with some methods of trying to satisfy those standards (e.g., snooping). But consider what Lara Buchak writes of a couple of variations on the case:

For example, consider a case in which a man simply stumbles across an envelope which he knows contains evidence that will either vindicate his wife’s constancy or suggest that she has been cheating. He seems to display a lack of faith in her constancy if he opens it and to display faith in her constancy if he does not. And this seems true even if the evidence has been acquired in a scrupulous way: we might imagine the wife herself presents the envelope to the man, as a test of his faith.181

As Buchak points out, even if the husband’s means of gathering evidence of his wife’s fidelity are themselves morally permissible (e.g., his wife voluntarily supplies him with evidence), choosing to examine that evidence for the purposes of deciding whether or not to believe his wife still expresses a lack of trust. We can say something even stronger. Assume that the husband does not resort to drastic measures to obtain evidence of his wife’s fidelity, and that his wife is not testing his faith. But assume that he nevertheless adopts the disposition of remaining agnostic about what his wife says regarding her fidelity until he comes across evidence that further corroborates her testimony. Having adopted this disposition, he simply remains agnostic until he has more evidence for the purposes of deciding whether or not his spouse cheated on him. While this may be a more epistemically reliable disposition than presumptively trusting in his wife’s say-so, it seems that the man’s adoption of it would be problematically distrustful and would signal that their marriage falls short of ideal.

Additionally, there are moral opportunity costs, so to speak, associated with developing epistemically exacting standards for depending on moral testimony. The

cognitive resources that one would have to devote to maintaining relatively demanding epistemic standards for the reliability of testimony could be spent devoted to other morally worthwhile pursuits. A morally virtuous person may stop gathering evidence and form her beliefs, even if more evidence might make it the case that she is more likely to arrive at the truth, so long as she meets some relevant standard of care in gathering evidence.\footnote{Preston-Roedder makes this point in defending faith in humanity, which he argues involves charitable, to the point of sometimes being anti-evidential, belief forming practices (2013, 35-36).}

So, I have shown that a disposition to depend a friend’s moral testimony, even when one has concerns about that friend’s reliability, is not necessarily epistemologically problematic. But even if it turns out that the disposition is, to some extent, epistemically irrational, we still might have moral reason to adopt it. Furthermore, that there can be tension between epistemic and moral considerations concerning the value of a disposition to depend on moral testimony does not count against my view. In fact, such tension demonstrates the bone fides of my account; it shows that my view really captures a distinct positive value of dependence on testimony if it can pull in an opposite direction from the more epistemically-grounded value of dependence on moral testimony.

1.3 Moral Irresponsibility

Some might argue, however, that the problem with a disposition to depend on the moral testimony of a friend when you are uncertain or have doubts about her reliability is that such a disposition is too morally risky; you might end up with false moral beliefs, and if you act on the basis of those false beliefs, you might act in morally bad ways.
It strikes me, though, that it can be good to adopt a disposition to depend a
friend’s moral testimony even in non-idealized epistemic conditions in which we open
ourselves up to the moral risks that accompany the fact that she may turn out to be
unreliable. In what follows, I will advance some considerations that I think should incline
us toward this view. (Recall, though, that my aim is not to try to resolve precisely how
much unreliability in our dispositions to depend on moral testimony we should judge to
be an acceptable trade-off for the value of the disposition itself.)

First, remember that in the preceding chapter I argued that a disposition to depend
on a friend’s moral testimony can be valuable as an expression of the trust that is
constitutive of the ideal of friendship. On my account the non-remedial value of the
disposition to depend on moral testimony is trust-based. If we press too hard on the point
that the disposition is too morally risky, at least when it is directed at friends about whose
reliability we are uncertain or have doubts, then we threaten to impugn many of our trust-
based practices. Should I trust my husband to build the outside deck? He says he can do it
and that he wants to, but in the time that I have known him I have never seen him build
anything. It would surely be less risky to hire a professional contractor but, on the other
hand, if I push for that he might see me as lacking trust in him, which might hurt him and
our relationship. It might be thought that whatever our intuitions about such a case, they
have no bearing on the issue at hand because the considerations that count in favor of
hiring a contractor, and against the trust-based considerations for endorsing my husband’s
DIY project, are not moral. But imagine that the deck is ten feet off the ground; surely
safety concerns are morally significant. Cases like this are complex, but they are familiar:
we often find ourselves in situations in which the value of trusting pulls against other
moral considerations. Trust does not always win out in these situations, but often it does. Because trust is so important to our relationships, and our relationships are themselves so important, trust even wins out when the degree of risk is quite high and the consequences of our trust being let down are morally weighty.

Second, to say that it might be worth it to take on the moral risks associated with a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony when we are uncertain or have doubts about her reliability, is not to say that we should not take steps to mitigate this risk. First, one of the most obvious things that we can do, and that we often do, is to choose morally decent friends. At least ideally, we choose our friends in part because we think that they are morally upstanding. That is, I presume that our choice of friends is, or at least should be, partly a response to certain good features of our friends, including our friends’ moral character and trustworthiness. So the link between someone’s being our friend and his being reliable about moral matters need not be merely accidental (nor, of course, is it necessary). If we adopt the disposition that I have been defending, then, ideally at least, it is not as if we are just as likely to depend on the moral testimony of a sinner as we are to depend on the testimony of a saint.

Apart from choosing upstanding friends, we can also build checks into the disposition itself. I already briefly mentioned one way to do this: if you come to realize that your friend is locally unreliable in some way, you can try to fine-tune your disposition to depend on her moral testimony such that it excludes the circumstances of her unreliability. We try to do this all the time with our belief dispositions. My friends and family know not to take me seriously before my first cup of coffee. I am generally

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[183] For a more subtle articulation and careful defense of this point, see Jollimore (2011).
disposed to believe my friend Erin’s appraisals of others’ talents, but when it comes to her kids I know to give pause. There are other ways of fine-tuning our dispositions. For example, we can build checks into the disposition such that we are particularly sensitive to defeaters or evidence of unreliability when the stakes are high. Again, do this all the time with our belief dispositions. I am generally disposed to believe my friend, and on her say-so I take on all sorts of beliefs in rather inattentive fashion (e.g, beliefs about the weather, about her day, about the news, etc.). But when the stakes are high, I tend to be particularly sensitive to defeaters. If, for example, she is walking in front of me on a hike after a recent downpour, and she tells me that the trail ahead is not slippery, I believe her but I remain alert.

Finally, from the outset of this project I have set aside the ethics of testifying, but I will briefly mention it here because it seems like it might one of the most relevant considerations to navigating the issue at hand. In the previous chapter I argued that often times depending on a friend’s moral testimony will be particularly important as an expression of trust when that friend’s testimony functions as an invitation to accept his word just based on his say-so. Presumably, issuing such an invitation brings with it certain responsibilities; for example, a testifier should have grounds for thinking that he can live up to your trust, should you accept his invitation. So, to return to an earlier example, part of the reason I might ultimately trust my husband to build the deck even though I have never even seen him hold a hammer, is that I trust that he takes his responsibilities as a testifier seriously.

To sum up: in answer to the question of whether we should direct a disposition to depend on moral testimony at our friends in cases in which we are uncertain or have
doubts their reliability, I have shown that in such cases the disposition need not be epistemically irrational. Even if it is, however, it can still be morally valuable—which gives further evidence for the claim that dependence on moral testimony has non-remedial value. In response to the concern that an epistemically subpar disposition to depend on moral testimony would be too morally risky, I have pointed out that we often take on significant and weighty moral risks in the name of trust, that we can safeguard against these moral risks, and that we share the burden of ameliorating these risks with those on whom we depend.

2. **AUTONOMY AND THE LIMITS OF DEPENDENCE ON MORAL TESTIMONY**

In this section I will explore two versions of the worry that dependence on moral testimony should be limited because of autonomy-related concerns. According to a strong version of the worry, we ought never to depend on moral testimony. According to the weak version, a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony should be limited to exclude central moral beliefs.

2.1 **Autonomy and the Asymmetry Thesis**

Robert Paul Wolff articulates the strong version of the worry that dependence on moral testimony conflicts with the ideal of autonomy:

> The autonomous man… may learn from others about his moral obligations but only in the sense that a mathematician learns from other mathematicians—namely by hearing from them the arguments whose validity he recognizes even though he did not think of them himself… He
does not learn as one learns from an explorer, by accepting as true… accounts of things he cannot see for himself.\(^{184}\)

The sense of ‘autonomy’ that Wolff appeals to in this passage seems to be a sense according to which the autonomous person is one whose moral beliefs are based on her own recognition of the propositions’ right-making reasons. This notion of ‘autonomy’ is clearly inconsistent with dependence on moral testimony as I have defined it. Recall from Chapter I: For \(H\) to \textit{depend} on \(S\)’s testimony that \(p\) is for \(H\) to believe \(p\) on the basis of \(H\) taking \(S\)’s saying \(p\) as a sufficient reason for believing \(p\). If the moral beliefs of the “autonomous man” must be informed by “arguments whose validity he recognizes,” then he cannot take them on based upon another’s say-so. It appears that Wolff takes his point, here, to apply to morality broadly. He can be seen, then, as appealing to autonomy to undergird the asymmetry thesis (the thesis that while testimony is a perfectly fine source for non-moral belief, there is something problematic about basing one’s moral beliefs on it).

How troubling we take this worry to be for dependence on moral testimony depends on how plausible we regard this conception of ‘autonomy.’ Julia Driver has convincingly argued that it is not very plausible.\(^{185}\) She points out that this conception of autonomy involves a confusion over levels of decision-making. If I \textit{decide} to trust the expert, I have made an autonomous decision… While it is true that when I trust the expert judgment… I am not myself grasping the reasons

\(^{184}\) Wolff (1970, 13).

\(^{185}\) You might wonder, then, why I would bring up a worry that I agree rests on a conception of autonomy that’s not very convincing. I do so because this worry is out there: it is in the literature, it has been proposed to me at conferences, etc.
for the expert having made the judgment. However… [t]he decision to trust has been made for reasons the agent grasps and endorses.186

As Driver suggests, when I depend on moral testimony, even if my moral beliefs are not based on my own recognition of propositions’ right-making reasons, I can still hold these testimonially-based moral beliefs for reasons that I endorse, i.e., for the reasons that I decided to depend on testimony in the first place. While the concept of ‘autonomy’ is vexed, and while I do not propose to even begin to give a full account of it, it seems that we should support a more expansive notion of it than the one that Wolff puts to work if we want to preserve many of our mundane social practices. Even if we allow that when you depend on others for moral testimony you are, in a sense, ceding your agency, it seems unduly rigorist to insist that all ceding of agency is inconsistent with autonomy. Of course, we can go too far in ceding our agency in ways that seem at odds with autonomy (recall Hill’s example of the deferential wife). But, as autonomous agents, we often decide to allow others to make significant decisions for us, even when we do not ourselves have an appreciation of the grounds for their decisions, and even when those decisions are morally important.

2.2 Autonomy and Differential Belief Practices

Even granting that not all dependence on moral testimony is objectionably heteronomous, some might still argue that there are autonomy-based limits on the extent to which we can legitimately cede our moral agency to others’ by depending on their moral testimony. The thought is that there are types of moral beliefs that one should not depend on others for.

because of their centrality to one’s agency and identity. A disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony ought not to extend to moral beliefs that play an important role in informing which commitments and projects hearers take on and how they carry them out, especially when these commitments and projects are hugely consequential for hearers. For example, it seems problematic for one to depend on others’ testimony for her belief about whom she should marry, or her belief about whether she should dedicate her life’s work to preventing climate change (even if in her own deliberations about these matters she considers input from others).

I am unsure what to say about this worry in general because I am deeply troubled by cases like Hill’s deferential wife case, and, relatedly, because it strikes me as exceedingly plausible that dependence on moral testimony (and other sorts of dependence) can in some cases undermine our autonomy. However, I want to suggest that the cases that are appealed to in support of this worry are likely to be a sort of “perfect storm” in that they are troubling for reasons beyond autonomy-related concerns. It is unsurprising, then, that they would look like the sorts of cases to which we would be least likely to want to extend a disposition to disposition on moral testimony. Nevertheless, I do not think that we can altogether rule out the value of depending on others’ testimony in these cases. Let me explain.

It strikes me that the troubling nature of cases used to motivate the autonomy worry is multi-faceted. That is, there are distinct, non-autonomy related concerns that can be raised about these cases.

One thing that is troubling about these cases is that it seems that it is unlikely that our friends are more reliable than we are about the matters in question; for example, we
are often epistemically better positioned than others are, even our friends, to see who we should marry or to which projects we should commit. Our intuitions that it is troubling to depend on friends’ moral testimony about these matters, then, might be tracking the epistemic and moral concerns about depending on unreliable testifiers that I discussed in the previous section.

But, for the sake of argument, let us grant that our friends’ are in fact more reliable in these cases. This fact, in itself, would be troubling: it would exhibit a failure of self-knowledge for someone else to know better than oneself who one should marry, for instance. It is plausible to think that self-knowledge is valuable, in part, because it essential to autonomy (i.e., autonomy requires that one critically reflect upon and endorse one’s own beliefs and values, at least to some extent). But it is also plausible to think that the value of self-knowledge extends beyond this: self-knowledge seems important for the development of virtue, self-care, and acting well more generally, for example.

This last point about acting well is worth expanding upon. Part of the reason that these cases seem troubling is that without a grasp, indeed a fine grasp, of the underlying reasons why one should marry a particular person or take on a particular life-altering project, it is hard to see how one could navigate such commitments and projects well. This brings us back to a discussion from Chapter III: there, I argued that concerns about dependence on moral testimony that appeal to the value of moral understanding are most likely to get traction when the content of the testimony is practically important for moral agency. So, the sorts of cases used to motivate the autonomy worry that is our present concern, are also the sorts of cases that appear most troubling in terms of moral understanding.
So the cases that used to motivate the autonomy worry are at the confluence of a number of others worries, including worries about unreliable testifiers, self-knowledge, and moral understanding.

All the same, it could still be that a disposition to depend on moral testimony that extends to such cases is valuable. To say that we are often are in a better epistemic position than our friends with respect to our own commitments and projects is not to say that we are infallible. We all have blind spots, even when it comes to our own commitments and projects, and often our friends are particularly well-positioned to support us, epistemically and practically, in dealing with these blind spots. That is, our friends might in fact be more reliable than we are about moral matters that are centrally important to our agency and identity, and so it might sometimes be wise for us to depend on their moral testimony.

Let me spell out, in greater detail, the conditions under which the value of such a disposition—a disposition to depend on a reliable friend’s moral testimony concerning your central moral beliefs—is most likely to be realized.

First, as I pointed out in the preceding section, testifying brings with it certain responsibilities. Among them, our friends should take special care in ensuring the accuracy of the moral testimony when it makes great claims upon us, as it does when the content of the testimony concerns matters that are central to our agency and identity. Our confidence that our friends have taken such special care can, in part, justify our dependence on them for our central moral beliefs.

Second, since moral understanding seems important for navigating our most central commitments and projects well, as I argued above, it seems that the value of a
disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony is more likely to extend to negative, rather than positive, claims. For example, it seems far less troubling for you to depend on a friend’s testimony about who you should *not* marry, as opposed to a friend’s testimony about who you should. If you depend on your friend in the latter case, and act on the basis of that dependence, you set yourself up to enter into a commitment that you are ill-positioned to live out well.

Third, recall a point that I spelled out more fully in the preceding chapter, but that is worth returning to here: note that we often depend on friends for beliefs, commitments, and projects that are fundamentally important to the shapes of our lives. Intuitions that ceding our agency to them in these matters is objectionable are dispelled, at least in part, when the ceding of agency is reciprocal.

So, I do not think that we can rule out, in general, the value of depending on friends’ moral testimony in the cases used to motivate the autonomy worry. Even though the dependence in these cases is troubling, and for reasons that go beyond autonomy-related concerns, the value of a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony still might extend to them. Depending on our friends’ moral testimony, in such cases, might be a good way to correct for our blind spots, especially when we are confident that our friends take seriously their role in shaping our lives by their testimony, when the content of the testimony is negative, and when the dependence is reciprocal. Under these conditions, trust in our friends may be well-placed.

Finally, note that the concerns used to motivate this sort of autonomy worry can cut both ways. In the preceding chapter I argued that a disposition to depend on a friend’s moral testimony can be valuable as an expression of our trust. In this section I considered
the worry that there are autonomy-related limits to the value of such a disposition that appealed to the centrality of certain moral beliefs to one’s agency and identity. But this very same fact—the fact that moral beliefs are central to our agency and identity—also counts in favor of my view, generally: as I argued in Chapter IV, due to the centrality of moral knowledge to our agency and our ways of seeing the world, it seems that the ideal of friendship would be undermined by friends failing to be disposed to depend on one another’s moral testimony. That is, that moral beliefs can be central to our identities and agency can count against and in favor of dependence on moral testimony.

3. Conclusion

This dissertation has been concerned to argue for a new version of optimism about dependence on moral testimony. To that end, against pessimistic views regarding moral testimony I have argued that dependence on moral testimony can confer epistemic warrant (Ch II) and that it is not at odds with good moral agency (Ch III). I have agreed with optimists that dependence on moral testimony is an important means to overcoming our defects, but that is not the whole of the story: it is not only our epistemic limitations that justify our dependence on moral testimony, but also the importance of such dependence for the flourishing of our intimates relationships (Ch IV). There of course remain questions about when and how far dependence on the moral testimony of friends is to be cultivated (Ch V). But I have shown that dependence on moral testimony is not simply for those who cannot realize the ideals of moral agency; it is among those ideals.
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