

1. Introduction

Suppose you are uncertain about some moral question. Are you falling morally short, if you rely on moral advice? Consider Eleanor:

Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong. (Hills, 2009, p. 94)

Many philosophers have found Eleanor's deference intuitively troubling. Yet, they observe, deference about, say, the tax code is not at all troubling.²

One diagnosis has proven particularly popular. It says that the problem with moral testimony lies in the fact that it can change beliefs but not feelings. Its proponents point out that we should be in touch with morality not just intellectually but also affectively. (The tax code, fortunately, makes no such demands on our affective lives.) An agent who forms a moral judgment based on testimony will thus be emotionally alienated from the moral judgment they accept. They may come to believe – even know – that a given course of action is right or wrong. But they won't *feel* it. Herein lies the problem with moral deference.

To get a sense of how widespread this view is, consider the following quotes, from authors with a range of moral and meta ethical commitments:

It's perhaps more important that deference can be problematic because of the state it leaves the agent in after deference. For one thing, when one receives moral knowledge by testimony, it is very unlikely that one is receiving the disposition to react emotionally as well. (Howell, 2012, p. 18)

It seems problematic either because one probably cannot form moral judgments through deference or because, even if one can do so, forming moral judgments in that way is likely to lead to a clash or discord between one's moral judgments and one's moral sentiments. (Fletcher, 2016, p. 66)

The emotional achievement is important here, I think. [...] Typically, the emotional responses that are closely connected with moral judgments are responses to the morally wrong (say) *de re*, and not merely *de dicto*, that is under the description "morally wrong" This is why there seems to be something objectionably cold about a moral judgment that is based solely on deference to the expert. (Enoch, 2014, p. 255-56).³

My aim in this paper is to challenge this diagnosis: that moral deference will leave the agent emotionally disconnected from the features that matter. I do so by examining the phenomenon of

¹ The place where I thank all the helpful people and all the generous funders.

² See Hopkins (2007), McGrath (2009), Sliwa (2012).

³ Similarly, Callahan (2018) argues that moral understanding involves motivational and affective responses to the relevant moral propositions and appreciation of the relevant support relationships between them. And while moral testimony may give you the right cognitive orientation, thus providing you with moral knowledge, it leaves you affectively alienated from the moral reasons at stake in a way that precludes moral understanding. Jones (1999) also notes the tension between trusting on testimony and the fact that moral knowledge is typically grounded in emotional sensitivity to certain facts. A notable departure from this consensus is Wodak (2021) who argues that normative testimony can justify affective attitudes of approval and disapproval.

hermeneutical advice: this is moral testimony that aims at helping an agent to make sense of her moral situation. Hermeneutical advice, I argue, has the power to change minds *and* hearts.

The paper then has two ambitions. First, it aims to make a contribution to the debate on moral testimony, advocating on behalf of the optimist about moral testimony. But hermeneutical advice is a familiar and important part of our moral experience; it deserves philosophical attention in its own right. This then is the second ambition of the paper: to explore the phenomenon of hermeneutical advice.

The Pessimist's Argument: moral testimony and affective alienation

Let us take a closer look at the claims in the quotes above. The authors all share the concern that after deferring the recipient of testimony will find herself in a state of emotional disconnect. She may know the right answer to the moral question she put to her advisor – that the war is unjust, that eating meat is impermissible – but she will lack the emotional dispositions and responses that the moral situation demands. Her judgment will be “cold”, as Enoch (2014, p. 256) puts it.

This implies a claim about the agent's situation before seeking out moral testimony. She must have already been in an affectively impoverished state *vis-a-vis* the morally relevant features of the situation. After all, it is implausible that receiving moral testimony made her worse off in that regard. Rather, it's that her epistemic predicament had two elements: she was emotionally disconnected and morally ignorant. Moral testimony only addressed the latter, leaving her in a disjointed state.

This may well leave us puzzled: why should it trouble us that moral testimony addresses only one of two shortcomings of an agent? Why should this lend support to pessimism about moral testimony? After all, if you have both a tooth- and a backache and a medicine effectively relieves you of the toothache, it's still a pretty good medicine!

The thought that the disconnect reflects something troubling about moral testimony makes sense if we assume that the two ways in which the morally ignorant agent falls short – affectively and cognitively – are closely connected: it is *because* she is insufficiently affectively attuned to the morally significant features of the situation that the agent is morally ignorant. Moral testimony is thus problematic not just because it leaves the agent in a state of affective-cognitive dissonance but because the affective dimension really is the root cause of her moral ignorance.

This means we can unpack the Pessimist's Argument against relying on moral testimony as follows:

P1. Generally, an agent is in a state of moral ignorance with respect to a moral situation because she is insufficiently affectively attuned to its morally relevant features.

P2. Moral testimony can transmit moral knowledge.

P3. Moral testimony cannot bring about affective attunement.

P4. An agent who has moral knowledge about a situation but is not affectively attuned to its morally relevant features, is in a state of alienation.

Therefore, relying on moral testimony leaves agents in a state of alienation.

Moral testimony treats the symptom – moral ignorance – without curing the underlying disease of affective disconnect. The resulting state of alienation is inherently bad or defective.

I will challenge Premise 3 of the Pessimist's argument.⁴ I argue that moral testimony can change not just our beliefs but transform our emotional outlook on a situation. The crucial insight is that moral testimony can transmit *moral perspectives* on a situation. Perspectives are not propositions. Rather, a perspective is a way of thinking about a subject matter. To have a perspective on a subject matter is to have a set of cognitive and affective dispositions: to notice, to remember, to see as morally or explanatorily salient, to tune in with some features affectively, to see similarities and differences, to apply certain concepts (rather than others). I call perspective-transmitting moral testimony *hermeneutical advice*.

The preview of my argument is as follows: hermeneutical advice transmits moral perspectives on a situation. To adopt a new moral perspective is, in part, to change what one is affectively attuned to. Hermeneutical advice is a form of moral testimony: when we adopt a new moral perspective based on a testimonial exchange, we are deferring to our interlocutor's epistemic authority. Thus moral testimony can transmit affective attunement.

Hermeneutical advice is pervasive in our moral lives. Surprisingly, it has evaded philosophical scrutiny.

2. Hermeneutical advice as transmitting perspectives

What do I mean by hermeneutical advice? Here is an example.

Sara used to have a very high-powered job in consulting. But after she and her partner John had children, they decided that she would take a few years off to look after them. The cost of good quality childcare is very high where they live and John had already been promoted and was making more money. It made good economic sense for Sara to stay home. And, Sara tells herself, she is lucky to be able to enjoy her kids while they are little as opposed to have to rush and juggle work and childcare. ("Enjoy them while they are little!", is a constant refrain she hears from the well-meaning elderly ladies she meets on the way to the playground.) Still, she finds her mood slipping. John works long hours, so she is looking after two toddlers by herself. She is also looking after all the household logistics. She often feels exhausted and irritable, particularly at John. But then she also feels guilty for her resentment. After all, John is working very hard and she is lucky to be able to stay home with the kids – or so she reminds herself. One day, feeling particularly discontent, she talks things through with a friend: "I'm so tired in the evenings, I am barely standing upright. And then John comes home and he wants me to give him all my attention and listen to him tell me about whatever went down at his work. And I just want to be left in peace. And then he complains that I don't take an interest in him. And then I feel guilty because he does have a really stressful job. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm just constantly feeling annoyed. *Everyone* annoys me." Her friend listens to her and after a while notes wryly: "It sounds like maybe you need a vacation? Or at least a weekend? John isn't the only one working: you work all day too. You provide household and childcare labour all day. And then John asks for some emotional labor on top of that. No wonder you're exhausted and irritated!"

We can imagine, that Sara leaves the conversation with her friend changed. This change may be instantaneous or it may come slowly, well after the end of it. Suppose she eventually responds as follows: "I haven't thought about it in this way before. But yes, that's it!" What is it that she has gained?

⁴ I will, for the sake of the argument, concede the others to the Pessimist. For a defence of premise 2, see Hills (2009), Sliwa (2012), Hopkins (2007). Premise 1, while less often explicitly defended, is widely taken for granted. See Jones (1999).

You may be tempted to suggest that Sara's gain is conceptual: her friend suggested a new concept to apply to her situation. Miranda Fricker has argued that when agents from an oppressed group are unable to *name* their experience therefore unable to communicate it to others, this can constitute a distinctive form of epistemic injustice: hermeneutical injustice. (Fricker, 2007, p. 150) By suggesting to Sara that she should apply the concept "work" to her experience, her friend enables Sara to both name and communicate it.

But I don't think that Sara merely learned that a particular concept – work – applies to her experience. If this were so, Sara would have primarily learned a linguistic fact: "that's what my experience is called!" But Sara's making sense of her experience as *working* is not just coming to know a linguistic fact. Rather, Sara learns something *about her experience*: what it is about it that is morally significant, how it matters. She comes to see it in a different light.⁵

Let's pursue this thought. I suggest that the conversation with her friend makes salient to Sara certain features of her situation and highlights their moral significance. There's the fact that Sara isn't simply "spending time" with her kids. She is caring for them: keeping them fed, clothed, reasonably clean and alive. This is care work and it is taxing, both physically and emotionally. Then there's keeping track of all household logistics: from keeping the fridge stocked to medical appointments and contractors. In making these aspects of Sara's situation salient, her friend highlights certain normative upshots: that Sara's exhaustion at the end of the day reflects a day spent on her feet working for her family, rather than being inexplicable or a deficit on her part. It makes salient that Sara's contribution to the household deserves recognition and that Sara deserves rest, too. It raises questions about the fairness of Sara and John's domestic arrangement – if not the fairness of the distribution of tasks and responsibilities, then the fairness of what is being acknowledged and what flies under the radar in their partnership. In this way, it validates Sara's resentment of John's further demands on her.

What the communicative exchange leaves Sara with then is not simply a new belief about her situation. It is not simply that her friend told her resentment is justified and Sara now believes it. Rather, her friend suggests to Sara a way of *organising* her thoughts about and perceptions of the situation. This way presents certain features as salient and morally significant, it suggests certain concepts to frame her experience in (care work, emotional labour, fairness), it provides her with metaphors, mental images, and analogies to think about and communicate her situation. It highlights the similarities between what Sara is doing (attending to the needs of her children, managing household logistics, contributing to the running of the household) and what John is doing (attending to the needs of his customers, managing work logistics, contributing – financially – to the running of the household). Importantly, in highlighting certain values and norms, her friend's advice validates a range of emotional responses and shows others to be misplaced. It transforms Sara's emotional outlook on her situation. Thinking of herself as *working* transforms a feeling of amorphous discontent and resentment into feeling insufficiently appreciated, taken for granted. In validating those feelings, it allays her feelings of guilt about her discontent.

Thus, whatever the testimonial transaction between Sara and her friend involves, it is not simply a matter of transmitting beliefs. It will be a matter of accepting a *moral perspective* on her situation. This is what I call *hermeneutical advice*.

⁵ Arguably, Sara's case has a flavour of epistemic injustice. And indeed, I believe that an account of the mechanics of hermeneutical advice will have important upshots for how we think about hermeneutical injustice. Sadly, to explore those upshots here would lead us too far afield.

I believe that hermeneutical advice is a staple of our moral experience: it is what we seek out when we try to make moral sense of a situation, when we feel stuck or confused, or uncomfortable about something, when we call our mum or text our friends.

Let us now home in further on the notion of a moral perspective, which is the currency of hermeneutical advice. Once we have a clearer understanding of what it is that is transmitted in hermeneutical advice, we can examine how hermeneutical advice works and whether it has the right features to constitute testimony.

3. What are Moral Perspectives?

The example of Sara gives us an idea of what a perspective does: it highlights certain features of the situation, it organises Sara's thinking by attributing moral significance to those features, making prominent certain moral concepts, loose associations, mental images, and emotional resonances.

To make this precise, we can draw on a rich body of work in recent philosophy of mind, where the notion of perspectives has recently attracted much interest. I will start by outlining the outlines of what perspectives are, drawing particularly on Elizabeth Camp's work. I will then build on this outline to develop an account of moral perspectives.

The central idea is this. Perspectives are ways of thinking about subject matters. Camp puts the general idea of a perspective as follows:

A perspective is an open-ended disposition to characterize: to encounter, interpret, and respond to some parts of the world in certain ways. (Camp, 2019, p. 24)

Having a perspective on a subject matter is having a set of interconnected cognitive and affective dispositions with respect to that subject matter. The bundle of dispositions that make up a perspective include the following:

Salience. Dispositions to find certain features within that subject matter salient. Salience here encompasses experiential salience (what stands out in one's visual feel, in one's auditory experience) as well as cognitive salience (which beliefs, memories are prompted).

Significance. Disposition to attribute significance to salient features: explanatory significance. A perspective thus does not just make certain features stand out in our experience but it also highlights particular relationships between those features: explanatory dependence, what's central, what is surprising, what is important.

Concern. Dispositions to foreground certain values, concerns, desires, commitments over others.

Concepts. Disposition to employ certain sets of concepts to think about the subject matter, to taxonomise features of the situation in particular ways, to draw specific distinctions about ways the world might be with respect to that subject matter.

Associative thought. Dispositions to draw particular inferences, to engage one's imagination, to see similarities and differences, to experience certain metaphors, stereotypes, and analogies as fitting, to draw intuitive connections, to employ particular mental imagery.

Affect. Dispositions to respond affectively to certain features or to experience those feelings as fitting: to attribute affective valence to certain features.

In this way, perspectives function as a filter and as an organising device.⁶ Amongst the myriad of things and features that could command our attention when thinking about a subject matter, perspectives guide our attention and emotional responses to a subset and organise this subset in a particular way. The intuitive beliefs and associative connections that come from a particular perspective provide a backdrop – a “mental setting” – from which we respond to evidence, integrate different aspects of the situation into a coherent whole. These backdrop mental states “flavour the contents of conscious states and influence the direction of thinking”. (Woodfield, 1991, p. 550) At the same time, by incorporating the agent’s concerns, perspectives build in practical and explanatory aims. Perspectives are, as Camp puts it, “tools for thought”. (Camp, 2013, p. 336)

Looking at the motley of dispositions that make up a perspective, you might be sceptical that there really is a unified phenomenon here. But there is more unity to the various dispositions that make up a perspective than may first meet the eye. The various components that make up a perspective are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Which mental images, associations, thoughts are cognitively salient to you when you approach a subject matter, influences what you experience as salient, which in turn makes some ways of taxonomizing come to mind more easily than others.⁷ At the same time, which concepts you bring to bear to a situation, influences what you remember, which beliefs surface to mind, which features strike you as salient.⁸ Which of your many concerns or values is at the forefront of your mind, influences what you attend to, which emotions you feel.⁹ Those, in turn, bear on what stands out to you as salient about the subject matter.

With the general notion of perspectives on the table, let me now develop the idea of *moral* perspectives.

Perspectives draw our attention to certain features and highlight them as explanatorily central, as striking, as surprising. Moral perspectives highlight certain features of the situation as both *salient* and *morally significant*. This can happen in two ways.

For one, perspectives can highlight certain *sets of moral norms* – including rights and duties – that we bring to bear when thinking about and interpreting a situation. For example, we may situate an event against the backdrop of norms of friendship, or norms of respect amongst colleagues, or institutional norms. Which norms we bring to bear will make a difference as to which features of the event will stand out to us and which significance we will attribute to them: for example, whether

⁶ In developing the notion of perspectives I am hemming closely to Camp’s account, drawing particularly on her (2019), (2020). A number of philosophers have taken up or introduced similar notions to explain a variety of phenomena. Tiberius suggests that “[A] perspective is defined by which value or values we are focused on, what we attend to, and what we take to be salient at the moment.” (Tiberius, 2008, p. 91); she takes the ability to shift perspectives as constitutive of wisdom. Munton (2021) and Whiteley (2021) appeal to “salience structures”, which are dispositions to attend to certain features and see them as explanatorily central. Munton uses those to give an account of prejudice Whiteley for an account of harmful patterns of attention. See also Watzl (2017) for an account of salience. Fraser (2017) highlights the disposition to draw certain inferences to explain why rape metaphors are harmful and their connection to hermeneutical injustice.

⁷ See Fraser (2018) for an argument about how metaphors can affect cognitive availability of certain inferences. See also Camp (2019, p. 30)

⁸ Thus, Yalcin (2018) argues that deploying concepts is a matter of distinguishing certain possibilities in logical space: it imposes a “resolutions” on logical space, making some beliefs more cognitively accessible than others.

⁹ As Murdoch notes: “Will continually influences belief; for better or worse, and is ideally able to influence it through a sustained attention to reality.” (1964/2013, p. 39)

we will perceive an indiscretion on the part of another as a betrayal of friendship, or as disrespectful treatment, or as an institutional failing to safeguard confidential information.

A second way in which perspectives guide which aspects of a situation we regard as morally significant is by highlighting certain *moral values*: say, trust, or love, or honesty, or friendship. Commitment to or care for this value will then structure our perception of the situation: features that instantiate the value, actions that diminish or enhance it will be foregrounded in our experience and thinking about the situation.

If in general perspectives provide the mental setting from which we integrate certain aspects of the situation into a coherent whole, moral perspectives provide a specific *moral* setting. They situate the occurrence against a backdrop of particular moral commitments, values, and sets of norms. Moral perspectives involve dispositions to use certain sets of *moral concepts* to think about the situation. But they also dispose us to engage in associative moral thought: to see intuitive moral similarities and differences to other situations, to reach for certain metaphors, to associate certain mental images. Finally, moral perspectives involve not just attributing moral but also *affective* relevance to certain features. Locating a particular incidence – an indiscretion by a colleague – within the framework of friendship norms highlights your entitlement to feeling betrayed by and upset with your colleague. Locating it within the framework of collegial norms of respect licences your feelings of being disrespected.

In short, moral perspectives determine *which* aspects of a situation we take to morally matter and *how* we take them to morally matter. Thereby they guide how we both think and feel about a situation. Let me give you a second example to illustrate how different moral perspectives can guide our affective responses.

Chiara is working closely with a colleague, who is a senior academic at her institution, on a project. They have been friendly, if not close, before and while their collaboration has been productive, it has not been altogether smooth. There are a number of details – small but important – on which Chiara and this senior academic disagree. The senior academic tries a number of times, somewhat heatedly, to bring Chiara around to his point of view but Chiara is not moved. This is partly because she simply weighs some of the considerations differently, and partly because she thinks her colleague is misjudging aspects of the situation. With respect to the issue in question, Chiara is the more experienced one. At a meeting where they present their results, her colleague takes the lead and Chiara is surprised that he simply presents his take on the issue as their settled consensus view. When Chiara cautiously pushes back during the subsequent discussion, the colleague grows visibly irate and publicly accuses her of “not knowing what she wants”. “I’m trying to keep this show on the road,” he snaps. There is an awkward silence in the room, then the discussion continues as if nothing had happened. Chiara is stunned and upset. She feels embarrassed and confused. She keeps replaying the exchange in her mind, trying to figure out what she could have done differently to avoid the escalation. Was it her timing, her tone? And why didn't anyone speak up – was she just imagining things? Afterwards, she talks things through with a trusted friend. “I’ll tell you what just happened,” her friend says, “your colleague threw a tantrum. How mortifying for *him* – no wonder things got awkward. At least he didn’t throw himself on the floor!”

Chiara's friend, I suggest, offers Chiara a different perspective on the interaction she experienced. This perspective – call it the “tantrum”-perspective – foregrounds different features of the situation than those to which Chiara was attending.

Chiara was focussed on her own actions and behaviour and whether she somehow infringed her colleague's authority. In contrast, her friend makes salient the behaviour of her senior colleague and the norms *it* violated: norms of civility and respect. It situates the event within those norms. He points out that, what's more, her colleague violated the basic expectation we have of each other, as adults, to remain in control of our tempers. Calling the angry outburst a *tantrum*, makes salient that it was unreasonable and uncalled for, something undignified and embarrassing to him, and a bit ridiculous, too. In this way, her friend gives Chiara a particular way of making sense of the situation she experienced. The awkward silence around the meeting table may not have been a chastisement of her but rather discomfort about her colleague's behaviour as well as a recognition that tantrums are best left to blow over. Her own behaviour wasn't so much a *reason* for the outburst but a trigger, so there is no point in ruminating on it. Crucially, her friend's advice offers her not just a different way of thinking about the situation but also a different way of *feeling* about it: it's not Chiara who needs to feel embarrassed about what happened; her colleague should. Indeed, insofar as Chiara takes her friend's advice; she may come to see the absurdity of the situation.

Thus, insofar as Chiara accepts her friend's advice, she mobilises a complex set of attentional, evaluative, cognitive, and affective dispositions that she brings to bear on the events in question. To adopt a moral perspective on a situation is not just a matter of attending to certain features or thinking in terms of certain moral concepts but also a matter of having particular affective responses and dispositions with respect to the situation at hand. By coming to see what she is doing as work, Sara becomes affectively attuned to the unfairness in her domestic arrangement. By coming to think of her colleague's outburst as a tantrum, Chiara becomes affectively attuned to the ridiculousness and inappropriateness of her colleague's behaviour.¹⁰

Let us take stock of where we have arrived in the argument. I have argued that hermeneutical advice transmits moral perspectives. I have also argued that to take up a moral perspectives involves a change in affective dispositions.

Now *if* hermeneutical advice is a form of moral testimony, it follows that the possibilities of moral testimony are greater than the pessimists have given it credit for: moral testimony can transmit not just moral knowledge but also affective attunement.

But is hermeneutical advice a form of moral testimony? I begin by looking at how hermeneutical advice works as a speech act: how it changes the common ground of the conversation. Second, I look at the normative profile of of hermeneutical advice: what kind of reasons are involved in accepting hermeneutical advice.

4. Hermeneutical Advice in Conversation

There is a quick rejoinder to my question whether hermeneutical advice is a form of moral testimony. It says *no* because testimony is closely linked to assertion – to the speech act of telling. In order to testify that *p*, I need to assert that *p*. To accept *p* matter of accepting a proposition based on someone's assertion that *p*.¹¹ But hermeneutical advice does not seem to fit the assertion model. After all, I have said that it does not transmit propositions but perspectives and a perspective is not a proposition.

In response, I want to question the close connection between assertion and testimony. And the first step is to get clearer on just how hermeneutical advice works as a speech act.

¹⁰ Note that a change in how one feels, as in the case of Chiara, in the context of a change of perspective does not see creepy nor does it involve Chiara's treating her friends as a "moral guru" in some problematic way. This differs from the cases discussed by Callahan (2018) and Mogensen (2017).

¹¹ See, for example, Moran (2005), Fricker (2012), Goldberg (2015), Graham (1997).

So let us start with some basics. On the traditional picture of conversation, conversation is primarily a cooperative information-exchange. The backdrop of this information-exchange is the common ground, which provides the conversational context. The common ground is the set of propositions whose truth is being taken for granted by speaker and hearer for the purpose of the conversation: they are what is presupposed.¹²

The common ground imposes a set of distinctions amongst possible ways the world might be. Engaging in conversation, we exchange information and so change the common ground. We add and subtract possibilities to and from the common ground.

To engage in conversation is, essentially, to distinguish among alternative possible ways that things may be. The purpose of expressing propositions is to make such distinctions. The presuppositions define the limits of the set of alternative possibilities among which speakers intend their expressions of propositions to distinguish. (Stalnaker, 1999, p. 85)

On an idealised picture of a conversational exchange (what Stalnaker calls a “nondefective context”) hearer and speaker distinguish between the same ways the world might be and they take these distinctions to be common knowledge.

What happens in assertion? The constitutive effect of making an assertion is to change the common ground by eliminating certain previously live options. When the hearer wonders whether p or not-p and the speaker tells the hearer that p the common ground is narrowed down (all possible worlds in which not-p are eliminated). This process is *additive*:

...the essential effect of an assertion is to change the presuppositions of the participants in the conversation by adding the content of what is asserted to what is presupposed.

(Stalnaker, 1999, p. 86)

But the common ground evolves not just as a result of assertion; it evolves in response to all speech acts – if I promise to marry you, the fact that I promised enters the common ground. It also evolves to other “manifest events”: if, as we talk, a toddler wanders in wearing a dinosaur costume, the fact that there is a toddler-sized T-Rex-wannabe, enters the common ground. Crucially, the common ground also changes in response to presuppositions made by the speaker, even if those were not previously part of the common ground.¹³ When I tell you “I have to rush off to pick up my kid from daycare later on,” the fact that I have a kid may not already have been part of the common ground, for it may have been unknown to you that I had a kid. In this situation, unless you challenge me (“You have a kid?!”), the this fact enters the common ground. This is presupposition accommodation.

Let us think about some of the ways in which the conversation between Sara and her friend departs from the paradigmatic case just outlined. The subject matter under discussion between Sara and her friend is Sara’s experience of her domestic arrangement. Consequently (we are assuming that her friend is a close friend who knows Sara’s situation well), there is plenty of overlap in what the two of them presuppose in the conversation: that Sara has a partner who works outside the house, that she has children, that she gave up her job, etc.

But it is notable that there is also significant and systematic divergence in the context set that Sara and her friend bring to the conversation. There are possibilities that are part of her friend’s context set – the possibility that Sara is being treated unfairly, that Sara is overworked, that Sara’s labour is under-appreciated – which are simply not part of Sara’s context set. Those are not possibilities that Sara entertains as she talks to her friend. When it comes to Sara’s domestic arrangement, Sara and her friend there is a large discrepancy in how they distinguish between different ways the world might be. They carve up the space of possibilities differently.

¹² Stalnaker (1999), chapter 4.

¹³ Lewis (1979).

Does this discrepancy make for what Stalnaker calls a “defective context”? Not quite. For in defective contexts, the conversational participants are oblivious of their divergence. But this is not true of Sara and her friend. Sara’s friend is aware of the discrepancy between her own context set and that of Sara’s.

This fact – that there is systematic divergence that one of the conversational participant’s is aware of – is important for understanding how hermeneutical advice works. Sara’s conversational aim then is not simply to make a surgical addition to the common ground but to drastically reconfigure it: to make a holistic change in which possibilities are under consideration for Sara and thereby to bring their context sets into alignment.

The central linguistic mechanism here is presupposition accommodation. When Sara’s friend suggests to Sara that she deserves a vacation, too, or that she is doing all this domestic labour, she is *presupposing* a certain way of thinking about Sara’s situation: a way that construes her activity at home, her looking after the kids, managing household logistics, etc as *relevantly similar* to John’s activity outside the house, that highlights certain moral norms as being at stake in the arrangement. Insofar as her speech act secures Sara’s uptake, Sara comes to share this way of thinking. And this alinement in perspectives – in what Sara and her friend take to be salient, which features they attribute moral significance to, which moral norms or values they see as being at stake – brings about a wholesale shift in the common ground of their conversation.

How is this accomplished? An important tool here is what Camp calls a *framing device*. Those linguistic expressions do not just transmit factual information about the subject matter but that also highlight certain features and evoke a range of associations, including affective responses. (Camp, 2019, p.17) Successful uptake of a communicative act that deploys a framing device does not merely consist in accepting a proposition but in actually acquiring (or activating) the relevant set of cognitive and affective dispositions: in structuring one’s thinking about the situation in a particular way.

In the exchange between Sara and her friend “work” functions as a *framing device*, suggesting a new way of thinking about and interpreting Sara’s (and also John’s) actions. Many thick moral concepts can function as framing devices. To call someone *a liar* in a conversational exchange, is not just to convey that the person has lied on some occasion but to foreground this property – their propensity to lie – as a central and essential aspect of their personality – one that we can appeal to to explain various aspects of their behaviour. It highlights norms of trustworthiness as being at stake. It validates certain affective attitudes towards that person: a sense of suspicion, withdrawal of trust.

The same is true with thick action verbs, such as to *rape*, to *bully*, to *steal*. These impose a narrative structure on the temporal series of events, presenting them as connected by the aims and intentions of the agent:

[A]ctions and events, although represented as occurring in the order of time, can be surveyed as it were in a single glance as bound together in an order of significance, a representation of a *totum simul*. (Mink, as cited by Velleman, 2003, p. 8)¹⁴

¹⁴ Fraser (2021) develops an account of narrative testimony.

But importantly, they also locate them in the context of certain moral norms. By highlighting values and foregrounding particular moral norms, they bring to mind associations and images and both evoke and validate affective responses.¹⁵

This gives us a story of how hermeneutical advice works as a speech act. Hermeneutical advice transmits moral perspectives. The linguistic mechanism on which it relies is presupposition accommodation. By presupposing a perspective, the hermeneutical advisor aligns her perspective with that of her advisee: a shared way of looking at the world, what commands attention, what has moral significance, what affords affective engagement. This perspectival alignment, in turn, goes hand-in-hand with a transformation of the common ground. It changes what is being taken for granted in the conversation, which different ways the world might be seen as relevantly at issue.

With a better understanding of how hermeneutical advice works, let us return to the worry that hermeneutical advice is not really testimony because it departs from the paradigm case of testimonial exchange: a hearer coming to believe that *p* based on the speaker's assertion that *p*. We can now see the force of the objection: to give hermeneutical advice is not – typically – a matter of asserting that *p*, aiming to add to the common ground in this way. It functions via presupposition accommodation.

But the claim that assertion is necessary for testimonial exchange has been increasingly challenged in recent literature. It has been argued that there is no principled reason for excluding presupposition accommodation as a vehicle of testimony.¹⁶ Keller (2022), for example, argues that by presupposing that something is the case, we incur a commitment to its truth much as if we were to straight out assert it: we present ourselves as a knower with respect to what we are presupposing and we give the other party grounds for complaint, if the presupposition should turn out to be false.

Still, there is trouble, you might argue. For it is one thing to say that we can testify by presupposing a proposition. It is another thing to say that we can testify by presupposing a *perspective*. For, once again, a perspective is not a proposition. It has no truth value. And so, in presupposing it, I cannot present myself as a knower nor can I guarantee its truth. The obstacle to hermeneutical advice being a form of testimony then lies not in its linguistic mechanism but in what it transmits.

Let's look at this worry. It is an opportunity to examine the epistemic profile of hermeneutical advice in more detail.

5. Hermeneutical Advice and Epistemic Authority

Testimonial exchanges are characterised by a specific form of epistemic dependence.¹⁷ When I come to believe on the basis of your testimony that your sister's new boyfriend follows a fruitarian diet, I depend on your word for the truth of what you told me. Your telling me – whether by assertion or presupposition – about his food-preference provides the justificatory grounds for the content of my belief. You present this proposition as true “in such a way as to implicate one's own epistemic

¹⁵ As Calhoun writes: “In thinking about our own moral experience [...], we stylize our experience. Each of us stretches the moral experiences occurring in our own lives on a common frame of concepts (agency, personal responsibility), images (self-mastery), and stock of examples (keeping promises, being a good Samaritan).[...] The patterns of moral thinking thus stylize moral experience by determining what we notice or overlook, remember or forget, and take as important or trivial about our moral life so that moral thinking only partly captures the completeness of experience.” (Calhoun, p. 213)

¹⁶ Keller (2022), Viebahn (2019), Langton (2021).

¹⁷ See Kusch (2002), chapter 2 for a discussion of how to delineate the category of testimony and discussion of epistemic interdependence as a mark of testimony.

authority on the matter”.¹⁸ But this story cannot work for perspectives because to take up a perspective is not to form a particular belief.

A possible response might be to between different ways in which moral testimony can affect a hearer. Thus, Alison Hills suggests that we can distinguish between transmitting moral knowledge and propagating it. In the first case, the testimony provides epistemic reasons:

Transmission of knowledge by testimony: the speaker’s knowledge that *p*, expressed through her testimony, is an epistemic ground of the learner’s knowledge that *p*. (Hills, 2019, p. 401)

In contrast, propagation involves practical reason:

Propagation is different, because it does not involve epistemic reasons - reasons to believe – at all, or at least not directly. Rather, it involves practical reasons of an epistemic kind: reasons to investigate, to conduct an inquiry into whether *p* is true. (Hills, 2019, p. 406)

Taking Hills’ distinction may suggest one way around the problem: perhaps, hermeneutical advice works by propagating knowledge, rather than transmitting it. It gives you a practical reason to embark on some course of inquiry – on the course of which, you may discover evidence that will justify some belief.¹⁹

This cannot be right. That’s because it fails to do justice to the epistemic dependence between advisee and advisor. When Sara accepts her friend’s hermeneutical advice and comes to think about her activity as work – starts paying attention to how work, recognition, and leisure is divided in her relationship, starts wondering about whether it is fair – she does so *because she trusts* her friend’s moral judgment. Asking someone for hermeneutical advice in a difficult situation is an act of trust.

More seriously, to concede that hermeneutical advice merely propagates moral knowledge calls into question its status as testimony. If the reasons given by hermeneutical advice are merely practical for engaging in certain lines of inquiry, the speaker’s epistemic authority does not seem to be on the line.

I believe that in giving hermeneutical advice, the advisor does not simply adduce practical reasons for pursuing some line of inquiry. Rather, she presents herself as a knower. She claims epistemic authority about which moral perspective is apt in a given situation. Accepting hermeneutical advice involves an act of deference to this epistemic authority.

Although perspectives are not propositions, we can evaluate them epistemically. Perspectives can be more or less *apt*.

What makes for an apt perspective? At a first pass, we can say that a perspective is apt when taking up the perspective enables the agent to gain knowledge she was not in a position to have before. A perspective is an epistemic tool: by focussing our attention on certain features, by situating the events in the context of certain norms and values, by making salient a particular set of concepts, by imbuing certain facts with affective significance, by highlighting associative connections, similarities, and differences, it enables us to gain moral knowledge. If Sara does not think of what she is doing as work, if she does not see that what she is doing is relevantly similar to John – they both contribute to keeping the family going – then there are certain moral facts about her situation that are simply not accessible to her: namely, that their distribution of labour, recognition, and leisure is not fair and that her resentment is an appropriate response because it tracks the morally relevant features of the situation.

¹⁸ Goldberg (2015, 77).

¹⁹ Although Hills does not discuss hermeneutical advice specifically, she makes a suggestion along those lines, arguing that when we learn from others through metaphor or pictures (such as the Wedgwood medallion) via propagation, rather than transmission.

Taking up the perspective enables Sara to gain moral knowledge in several ways. First, taking it up may involve forming beliefs that Sara did not have but that may be presupposed by the perspective (such as the belief that there are morally relevant similarities between John's activities outside of the house and Sara's activities inside the house, that norms of fairness are relevant in this context). Second, by directing Sara's attention to certain features, by organising her existing beliefs in a way that renders some of them salient, by attuning her affectively to some features, by disposing her to form certain associations, the perspective licenses questions and inferences that Sara would otherwise not be in a position to ask and draw. As Spender describes the perspective-shift of seeing women's domestic responsibilities as labour:

From this new ordering of reality, new possibilities arise, so that women can now begin to define their production of leisure for male consumption as a demanding, time consuming, and unjust task. (Spender, 1980, p. 70)

The aptness of a moral perspective is then, at least partly, a function of *how much* moral knowledge it enables the agent to gain about her situation.²⁰ Not all perspectives enhance an agent's epistemic situation. Perspectives can be pernicious: they can occlude as much as they can illuminate the moral significance of events, they can set agents on the path of fruitless inquiries, they can suggest false moral conclusions. In this way, Chiara was caught up ruminating on how her disagreement could have been offensive or inappropriate before her friend suggested a perspective that made clear that it was her colleague's outburst that was over the line. Or, even more perniciously, think of a woman whose date sexually assaults her and who tries to make sense of what happened to her as "bad sex", who feels profoundly distressed by the experience, while telling herself she is "overreacting" and blaming herself for not being more assertive.²¹

I suggest that a hermeneutical adviser does not merely communicate a perspective: she recommends the perspective as *apt*. Note that generally when we find ourselves confused or adrift, we often say that we are looking for a perspective on whatever it is that bugs us. We recommend good advisors and express admiration for the wise people in our lives by saying they have a sense of perspective. Valerie Tiberius (2010) argues that there is a distinctive virtue of perspective that is constitutive of wisdom.²²

Moral perspectives are necessarily partial – they always foreground some features of the situation, some moral values and norms at stake at the expense of others. The ability to negotiate different moral perspectives, depending on the demands of the situation, may thus be essential to moral wisdom as well as for being a good source of hermeneutical advice. The hermeneutical advisor recommends a particular way of making sense of one's situation as an *apt* way of making sense of it:

²⁰ How to measure knowledge is a tricky and important question here. See Treanor (2013) for a proposal. Note that epistemic aptness is not the only way in which we can evaluate perspectives – we can also assess them for how accessible they are psychologically, for how useful they are, given your concerns. See my (ms.) for more discussion.

²¹ The notion of apt moral perspectives can shed new light on the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice, as coined by Fricker (2007). In particular, it suggests an alternative to the received wisdom that hermeneutical injustice is to be cashed out in terms of unavailability of conceptual resources. As Medina (2017, p. 45) writes: "The semantically produced hermeneutical injustices are the paradigmatic cases on which Fricker and her followers have tended to focus: cases in which hermeneutical disadvantages and harms result from the unavailability of labels; cases where understanding fails because words are lacking." Instead, it suggests that you may suffer from hermeneutical injustice because you lack an apt perspective on what happened to you. I develop this idea in my (ms).

²² Tiberius (2010). Tiberius' focus is on the role of perspectives in the context of practical wisdom: living a good life, she argues, requires us to be able to bring different value-commitments to the foreground and to adjust our patterns of attention and affective responses accordingly. But there are important lessons and parallels to the moral case here.

a way that will improve the advisee's epistemic situation with respect to her moral situation. In this way she presents herself as a knower: a knower of which moral perspective to take in this situation.

If perspectives are ways of making sense of our situation, we can think of apt perspectives as intellectual skills. The hermeneutical advisor presents herself as a knower of how to make sense of the situation at hand.²³ She claims epistemic authority as to which perspective is apt. Know how can be based on testimony. Katherine Hawley argues that:

...the epistemic distinction between testimonial and nontestimonial *knowledge how*...turns on whether a given item of knowledge does or does not depend for its epistemic status upon the epistemic qualifications of the teacher and the learner's entitlement to rely upon those qualifications. (Hawley, 2010)

The hermeneutical advisor makes a claim to knowledge. To see this note that we can challenge hermeneutical advice by calling in question the epistemic authority of the advisor. Thus, Sara can resist the perspective suggested by her friend by saying: "yeah, what do you know about being at home with kids – you don't even have a dog." Chiara can resist the perspective on her colleague's behaviour by saying "You've been working from home ever since you joined that tech start up! What do you know about relationship dynamics between colleagues?" We can reject hermeneutical advice by doubting whether our would-be advisor knows how to make sense of the situation at hand.

This, in turn, brings out that when we do accept hermeneutical advice – when we take up the perspective that is being communicated to us – we do so on the basis of trust in our advisor. We trust them to know how to make sense of our situation. On the basis of this trust, we organise our thinking about our situation in a certain way: we attend to certain features, engage our affective responses in certain ways, foreground particular norms and values and reach for certain concepts of our thinking. In doing so, we defer to and depend on our advisor's epistemic authority.²⁴

Of course our trust in our advisor's knowledge of how to make sense of the situation is something that is itself open to epistemic assessment. And this is reflected in our moral practice. Typically, we seek out hermeneutical advice from those we already have a trusting relationship with: those who know us and whose judgment we have seen play out across different situations. When it comes to resolving your confusion about a situation of great moral importance, it is epistemically irrational to place your trust in a stranger or in a TicToc celebrity therapist.

Insofar as the perspective transmitted by your advisor is apt and you are justified in taking them to have the epistemic authority they present themselves as having, the apt perspective constitutes know how.²⁵

When we trust hermeneutical advice, we thus come to epistemically depend on our advisor in multiple ways. We depend on their epistemic authority in trusting that the moral perspective they offer us is apt. And insofar as we take up the apt moral perspective, its epistemic status as know how depends on the epistemic credentials of our advisor and our warrant in trusting them.

²³ See Buckwalter & Turri (2014).

²⁴ Fraser's observation (2021) is congenial here. She argues that in testimony, our epistemic dependence often exceeds simply dependence on the truth of a given proposition. Testimony comes to us in narrative form, which organises and frames the content. Fraser calls the relevant epistemic dependence "perspectival dependence" and she also draws on Camp's work to spell it out.

²⁵ There are questions here about the relationship between moral perspectives and moral understanding. I explore those further in my (ms.).

Let me end by returning to the beginning of the paper: the intuition that there is something intuitively problematic about relying on moral testimony. Recall Eleanor relying on her friend for the belief that eating meat is impermissible. This intuition motivated the Pessimists' project. What are we to make of it?

It is clear that not all moral testimony transmits perspectives. There is plenty of moral testimony that is not hermeneutical advice. It is this observation that strengthens my argument against the pessimist. For it suggests that advice-giving may be subject to a distinctive set of norms. Good advice should communicate not just knowledge but an apt perspective. As Calhoun writes:

"A friend who asks "What should I do?" asks neither for a pronouncement nor a list of rules. She asks for help in putting her situation into perspective, finding some interpretation of her circumstances that will make on course of action clearly preferable." (Calhoun, p. 216)

This gives us an alternative diagnosis of what goes wrong in the kinds of cases – like Eleanor who defers to her friend about the permissibility of eating meat – that have taken center stage in the literature on moral testimony. When her friend simply tells Eleanor that eating meat is impermissible, she is not giving Eleanor any hermeneutical advice. She is simply answering a yes-or-no question. Herein lies the problem. Mary's advice is subpar *qua* advice: what she says may be true but it is not good advice. It fails to give Eleanor a perspective on the situation she is faced with. The problem is not that Eleanor defers. It is that she settles for poor moral advice. The moral testimony literature has spent a great deal of energy on exploring what may be wrong with moral deference. It may be time to what makes for good advice.

6. Conclusion

We rely on friends, family, and mentors to make sense our moral situations. This phenomenon – so pervasive and commonplace in our moral practice – is what I call hermeneutical advice. What we look for when we seek out hermeneutical advice is a moral perspective on that situation: an interpretive key that will situate our experience against a backdrop of relevant moral norms and values, that will guide our attention, attribute moral significance, highlight conceptual resources and associative connections and guide our emotional responses. In accepting hermeneutical advice, we take up a new moral perspective on our situation. This can transform both how we think and feel about a situation. We accept hermeneutical advice on the basis of our advisor's epistemic authority. We trust them to which moral perspective is apt. In this way hermeneutical advice is moral testimony that changes both minds and hearts.

7. Bibliography

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