MORAL EXPERTISE

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There can be experts in astronomy, in engineering, in mathematics, and in chemistry. Intuitively, no one really challenges this. If I want to know something about astronomy, say, the number of rings circling Saturn, I will ask an astronomer or consult a book written by an astronomer, because astronomers are experts in the relevant area. When the astronomer tells me, “Seven ring groups and thousands of smaller rings,” I am justified in believing her. Given the belief is true, then I have acquired some knowledge that I did not have before. I have acquired the true belief that Saturn has seven ring groups in a justified manner, on the basis of expert testimony. Of course, experts are not infallible. But justification does not require infallibility, it simply requires reliability, and the astronomer is a reliable source of information about the planets.

To describe someone as a moral expert on analogy with an astronomy expert, or an engineering expert, seems to describe them as someone who has (much) more knowledge about morality than the average person. Further, the analogy seems to commit one to viewing them as good sources of moral advice and testimony.

But astronomy is descriptive. “Saturn has seven ring groups” is not a prescriptive or normative claim. It describes a feature of our solar system as it is, not how it should be. Expertise in normative domains can be thought of as a separate issue, and moral expertise is normative. People who seek out moral experts want to know how things ought to be and what they ought to do. The issue of moral expertise is significant because it helps us to understand if and how there is a difference between moral knowledge and understanding, and descriptive knowledge and understanding. It also figures into debates regarding whether or not one ought to rely solely on expert testimony when deciding how to act. If one believes, for example, that correct moral judgments involve legislating for oneself (rather than believing and doing what someone else tells you to do), then one may believe that there really are no moral experts in the sense of someone who has better access to the truths of morality than anyone else. Further, if it turns out there are no moral experts, or that even if there are, we are not justified in relying on their testimony, that will have profound practical implications. On some theories of virtue, the fully virtuous person is the same as the moral expert, and therefore the issue is important for developing a certain understanding of the morally virtuous person.
To start, consider claims such as:

(1) When Aubrey stole the food from the grocery store to feed his starving children, he did something wrong.
(2) People in affluent countries have a moral duty to try to alleviate famine.

Again, these sorts of claims are distinct from “Saturn has seven ring groups” because they are normative, they make claims about what we ought or ought not do, what is morally right or morally wrong, virtuous or vicious, etc. Thus, the moral expert will be someone who knows and/or understands how we ought to act and be. To say that a moral expert knows that p is to say that the moral expert has a justified true belief that p. To say that the moral expert understands that p is to say that the moral expert can also provide the correct justification for p, though as we shall see, some philosophers require even more for understanding.

Many philosophers have been skeptical of moral expertise. Gilbert Ryle argued there were no moral experts because there was nothing moral to be expert about. If there is no moral knowledge, because, perhaps, moral judgments and corresponding “assertions” are emotive or expressive and do not actually assert anything, then when an expert claims, “It is (pro tanto) wrong to steal” she is not actually passing along any knowledge she has, but simply expressing her feelings of disapproval toward stealing, and expressions of attitudes such as “Yuk!” or “Yay!” have no truth conditions, they are neither true nor false.

However, this suggests a much too narrow understanding of moral expertise. Even if there is no moral knowledge, there can still be other ways of spelling out moral expertise that accords with our considered views. “Correspondence with reality plus reliable access to that” is just one standard that we can employ. For example, an Emotivist might hold that the moral expert is one whose emotions are properly calibrated – they meet their fittingness or aptness conditions and/or suit their practical aims (of encouraging or discouraging others from similar behavior).

Thus, it is a mistake to dismiss expertise on these grounds since one can have an account of expertise in a domain as long as there are standards of correctness for the judgments and expressions themselves. One can even be a nihilist about morality, and believe that all moral claims are not true, and be better at moral judgments or acting morally than others. On this view there is no real moral knowledge, but we could have instrumental reasons for acting as if morality is true, or pretending that it is true, and those reasons would provide non-evidential justification for the moral claims, and form the standard by which the moral claims are evaluated.

However, in this chapter I will assume that there is moral knowledge. As noted earlier, one reason expertise has emerged as a significant topic of discussion in ethics has to do with its connection to the issue of deference to testimony, and whether or not one can acquire moral knowledge solely via the testimony of an expert. To defer to testimony is to accept what the putative expert has told you even though you don’t understand the reasons why the direction that they have given you is correct. That is, you do not understand their justification. This is quite different from taking advice from an expert, which you think about for yourself and in which you come to understand the underlying justification for the expert’s claims. No one challenges the view that there are many non-problematic ways that experts can help one acquire moral knowledge. Consider (1). Suppose that Candace can’t decide whether or not Aubrey did something that was, all things considered, wrong. On the one hand, he stole, and stealing is pro tanto wrong. On the other hand, he has a pro tanto duty to take care of his children as well. Candace discusses this with her friend Celestine, who she reasonably takes to be a moral
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expert – Celestine has a long record of making correct moral judgments. Celestine explains that, under the circumstances, the duty to take care of his children is more important than the violation of the norm against stealing, because it is necessary to alleviate the children’s suffering, and the store owner is simply losing a small amount of property. Suffering is more significant, morally. After Celestine talks to her about it, Candace comes to see for herself that, indeed, this makes a great deal of sense and acquires for herself the understanding that alleviation of suffering is a very, very significant moral reason in relation to other moral reasons. In this kind of case, there is no problem at all with listening to an expert. The problematic cases are those which involve someone relying only on the testimony of the expert in forming one’s belief. Thus, in the above case, suppose that Candace listened to Celestine, but still had no sense of which reason was weightier, and did not acquire an understanding of how to weigh suffering against other goods and evils. Nevertheless, she trusts Celestine and believes her when she says, “Aubrey did the right thing.” Candace now has a belief, and it is a true belief, but does the testimony itself provide sufficient justification? If the answer is “no” then there is a dramatic difference between expert testimony in descriptive cases as opposed to moral ones.

However, recent discussion has granted that one can acquire knowledge solely on the basis of expert testimony, and the problem has shifted to the issue of whether or not people should rely solely on moral testimony, when they lack an understanding of the underlying justification. For example, Alison Hills grants that one can acquire moral knowledge on the basis of expert moral testimony, but holds that one should not (Hills 2009). This is because, in part, moral understanding cannot be acquired this way, and it is moral understanding that is important. Moral understanding is understanding of the fundamental features of moral justification – moral reasons, and how those reasons factor into moral justification in a systematic way. So, according to Hills and others, a person with moral knowledge acquired via testimony but no moral understanding might perform the right action solely on the basis of this knowledge, but she would not be performing the right action for the right reasons, since she lacks an understanding, or an appreciation, of those reasons, and so the action would not be morally worthy or virtuous. For an action to be virtuous the agent must be performing the action for the right reasons. For example, if Cathy gives to charity for the sole purpose of reducing her tax burden, then she has done something that has good effects, but she hasn’t done it for the right reasons, in this case, reasons that arise out of caring for the well-being of other people. Thus, her action lacks moral worth, and it is not truly virtuous. The notion of a morally worthy action is generally attributed to Immanuel Kant, who uses the example of a shopkeeper to illustrate (Kant 1998: 11). The shopkeeper is honest to his customers in order to acquire and maintain his reputation for honesty, so that he can compete successfully. Here the shopkeeper, in giving correct change, for example, is acting rightly, but not for the right reasons. The right reason to act honestly is that it is commanded by the moral law. Only a shopkeeper who gives correct change for the right reasons also performs an action with moral worth. Morally worthy actions are better than merely right actions because they indicate the agent is motivated to act by the right reasons, that is, for the reasons that actually morally justify the action. Thus, the person performing the morally worthy action regards morality as binding on its own, separate from their own individual interests.

So, consider another case, similar to the Candace and Celestine case, in which one friend, Melissa, relies on another friend, Jamie, to help in cases of moral uncertainty. As Candace does with Celestine, Melissa correctly judges Jamie, on the basis of past experience, to be very reliable on moral matters. In this case, however, Melissa is not only worried about correctly judging, she is deciding on what to do, and wants to act rightly. Melissa is unsure about whether she should lie, to spare the feelings of someone else, or tell the truth. Limiting pain and honesty
both provide moral reasons, she is just not sure which dominates in this situation. When Jamie tells her, “Normally lying is wrong, but in this particular case it is right,” she believes her and acts accordingly. Jamie is the moral expert in this situation. On the view sketched above, Melissa acted rightly in telling the lie in this particular situation, but her action also lacks moral worth because she did so for the wrong reason—she did so on the basis of her friend’s testimony and without a full and systematic understanding of the moral reasons that provide justification for the action. Not only must one know what the relevant reasons are, one must also know how they weigh against each other in particular circumstances. One must know how they work, so to speak. The defect is that she did not come to the right conclusion in a way that involved her own appreciation of the reasons and how they are weighed against each other. The moral experts are the ones who possess this understanding. Hills further holds that there is something morally defective about deferring to testimony. She points to the instrumental concerns that such a person is not developing her own moral understanding, and thus is undermining her character, as well as the worry that there is something intrinsically defective about it since one seems to be outsourcing one’s autonomous decision-making.

Further, Alison Hills argues that moral understanding cannot be reduced to moral knowledge on her view, nor can moral knowledge be understood itself in terms of moral understanding. They are distinct. One can know a proposition is true, but fail to understand why it is true, as the testimony cases seem to reveal. More controversially she holds that one cannot account for understanding why \( p \) is the case in terms of knowing why \( p \) is the case. It is important for her to maintain the two are distinct in order to argue that the knowledge possessed by the person who defers to expertise cannot be recast as a form of understanding, otherwise one could argue that understanding itself can be transmitted solely via testimony regarding the fundamental justificatory moral reasons.

Other writers, such as myself, have challenged such a demanding view of moral expertise (Driver 2013). One can be a moral expert without possessing full understanding on my view, because moral expertise is understood as contrastive. A person can be a moral expert relative to a specific moral domain while lacking a full understanding of underlying moral reasons (Driver 2013). That person would be an expert relative to others with an even greater lack of understanding. Further, there are different ways in which someone can be an expert which involve very little in the way of moral understanding. This view is discussed further later in the essay.

Other writers are skeptical of expertise in another sense: they point out that even if, in principle, there are these moral experts, there is no real way to determine who they are, and then, even if we can determine who they are, we may have no reason to trust them. Plato, in the Charmides, was concerned with this issue. How can the naive, non-expert person, tell someone who is pretending to be a doctor from a real doctor? It would seem that since they lack the knowledge of what it takes to be a doctor, they won’t be able to properly judge. One response to this problem is to hold that one can tell over time when one keeps track of the person’s success rate.

However, one version of this argument points to the existence of serious moral disagreement to make the skeptical case. Many writers have noted that there is often great disagreement among people who are equally well credentialed (Cross 2016). This can occur at the theoretical level or the practical level. Consider a practical case: Maria is trying to decide whether or not she should respect her mother’s Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order, and allow her to die, or not respect it since she feels that her mother still has a fairly good quality of life: her mother is happy, enjoys watching television, and does not seem to be in any pain. She consults experts on moral decisions in end-of-life treatment, and finds that there is much disagreement about what
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she should do: some argue that she must respect her mother’s prior, rational, wishes but others tell her that since her mother is enjoying life she ought to reject the DNR order as it does not represent her mother’s current desires. Her mother now enjoys just sitting and watching children’s shows on TV all day, something her mother, at the time she made the DNR order, would not have wanted for herself at all. Indeed, she would have been horrified at the thought of such a fate in which her primary concerns and goals are gone. Both experts provide her with arguments that seem quite reasonable. She has no idea who to believe, who to judge the genuine expert. Since very many practical issues are like this – involving disagreement between thoughtful, well-credentialed people on what one ought to do – it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the non-expert to pick out the genuine expert. While much has been made of the credentialing problem, this does not mark a principled difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive. As in the descriptive cases, the non-expert uses the best available evidence, and, of course, can still make mistakes on whom to trust. In these sorts of cases, the disagreement might undermine moral knowledge, as well, and if the moral expert is one who possesses moral knowledge (perhaps in addition to having other properties), then there can’t be moral experts in areas of disagreement between equally well-credentialed “experts.” In these cases we can still reasonably hold that experts are those with more in the way of justified beliefs in a given domain. There can be two experts on the subject who disagree even if at least one of them must be wrong.

Here I assume that there are moral experts and moral knowledge, but argue that the issue of moral expertise has been hampered by lack of clarity about what it is. As I have argued elsewhere, there is no single primary sense of “moral expertise.” It can take different forms. The analogy I trade on is well known in ethics – it is the analogy between morality and language. Someone, for example, might not know anything about grammar at all, and be very well able to identify infelicitous expressions such as “Best the be to all” or “Forest swamped alert and by.” One can identify the infelicitous without being able to analyze it or explain it. One can make the right judgment but then not be able to explain it. That is still a form of expertise. Further, one may be able to identify correct and incorrect grammar, but have trouble oneself speaking or writing grammatically.

There are moral experts when it comes to making moral judgments, “a is the right action in this situation,” when it comes to practice or performance, “She reliably acts rightly,” and in terms of analysis, “Her action was right because it was the kind thing to do in these circumstances.” In this essay I will focus on judgment and practice expertise. It is these two that are closest to what most people have in mind when writing about the issue. Some theorists view the genuine moral expert as someone who is expert at both making the correct judgments and acting as they ought to act (Cross-reference to Bashour, Chapter 37).

34.1 Moral judgment

This type of expertise is similar to what Alvin Goldman refers to as cognitive expertise: “experts in a given domain … have more beliefs (or high degrees of belief) in true propositions and/or fewer beliefs in false propositions within that domain than most people do” (Goldman 2001: 91). If one is a moral expert in judgment then one makes judgments about moral matters that are more reliable than others. This could mean that when the expert judges that “x is wrong” that judgment is more likely to be correct than the same judgment made by the non-expert. One might also hold that to be an expert judge one must understand the underlying justificatory reasons that render the judgment correct. However, I believe that these can be separated when it comes to moral expertise, just as they can be separated in cases of non-moral expertise. For
example, a person may be expert at sorting, and thus expert at judging whether or not a chick is male or female, without also being able to justify the judgment, or to explain why there is a difference. For them it is simply a matter of correct perception. They are responding to reasons, but not at a conscious level that they are able to articulate. Thus, one can be more likely to be correct in one’s judgments without being able to provide justification.

The expert judge, then, makes more reliably correct moral judgments. But the expertise is understood relative to a contrast class. I may have a friend who is expert on free speech issues relative to me, and yet not expert relative to someone else. Goldman, in his analysis of expertise, also holds that it is comparative. However, he believes that the expert must reach some level of absolute command of the subject.

If the vast majority of people are full of false beliefs in a domain and Jones Jones exceeds them slightly by not succumbing to a few falsehoods that are widely shared, that still does not make him an “expert” (from a God’s eye point of view). To qualify as a cognitive expert, one must possess a substantial body of truths in the cognitive domain.

Goldman 2001: 91

I agree with Goldman’s claim in that we can distinguish between a God’s-eye view of expertise, and then an on-the-ground view of expertise. In the idealized sense of “expert” we do require some high threshold of knowledge and understanding. We use the term “expert” sometimes as a kind of honorific. It denotes significant accomplishment. And, again, to that extent, Goldman is correct. However, in other situations we use it to pick out the best person to consult on a given topic, even if not very much is known regarding that topic. Utterances such as, “She’s the expert, she knows more than anyone else, though nobody knows very much,” seem to make sense. I may live in a community in which no one knows very much about medicine, but one person knows a bit more than others. That is the person it would be reasonable for me to go to for advice, to consult. She might not be an expert from the God’s-eye point of view, but relative to anyone else I can consult in that community, she is. One could argue that in the case of fairly simple issues, where the choices are between “yes” and “no” and one isn’t also hoping at least for a glimmering of understanding, on the view I am suggesting here there would not be any real experts if the body of knowledge of the putative expert were too low, so that the expert got it wrong more than half the time. In that case, one would be better off just flipping a coin to decide. That would be true (barring a consideration of the instrumental goods associated with seeking out advice, etc.), but that also does not seem to be a typical case. If we don’t accept the full contrastive picture of expertise, then we are left with the possibility that, really, there are no experts. And that might be fine. The contrastive account also has a problem in that if everyone in the group has the same knowledge as everyone else then there are no experts, even if all of them know an awful lot about the norms in question. That seems odd, because utterances such as, “You can ask anybody, we are all experts,” also seems to make sense. Most likely the best account distinguishes between purely contrastive expertise, God’s-eye expertise, and something in between, the real on-the-ground standard of expertise, which sets a threshold in some non-idealized way. The on-the-ground expert needs to get things right at least greater than 50% of the time, and must be more reliable than others.

Thus, the moral expert in this sense is the person who makes more reliable judgments about what is right or wrong, or virtuous and vicious, etc. But this isn’t clear enough. It is tricky because moral judgments are frequently made on the basis of both descriptive and prescriptive, or normative, facts. What does the distinctly moral part of the judgment consist in? If we
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understand the moral expert as someone who reliably makes correct judgments about what ought to be done, what policy should be implemented, etc., then some experts are those who can, for example, foresee what will happen better than others, or who have better empirical understanding. Consider again the second claim we began with: “People in affluent countries have a moral duty to try to give to famine relief charities.” Two individuals may agree on the moral reasons in play, but disagree about whether or not this claim is true because they disagree about empirical facts. One person may believe that it is true because we ought to alleviate human suffering and working to end famine does that because it alleviates hunger. The second may think it false, because we ought to alleviate human suffering, but she thinks that giving to famine relief fails to accomplish that goal (perhaps due to corruption, or worries that famine relief makes the problem worse in the future). In this particular case the one who is correct on the empirical facts makes the correct judgment. If I am trying to decide what to do, and I defer to the one who favors giving aid for famine relief purposes, then I am doing so because I believe that expert has better command of the empirical facts. This expert is not better than the other judge in terms of the possession of moral knowledge, knowledge of the underlying moral justification relevant to the question of famine relief.

But this is impure deference to moral expertise. That is, this expert does reliably make better moral judgments than others, but does so through a better command of empirical facts. Distinctively moral expertise is expertise on the moral facts, it is expertise regarding the underlying moral justifications, the reasons that render the act right or wrong. We might understand this as a knowledge of what counts as a moral reason, or which moral consideration dominates in a given situation, etc.

However, many writers have viewed moral expertise as involving both descriptive and normative knowledge. For example, G. E. Moore believed that the moral expert was able to understand the right action in terms of good or bad, and cause and effect. The expertise consisted in identifying the good and then using empirical methods to appropriately judge cause and effect (Eggleston 2005). The two judgments “x is good” and “a causes x” are the two judgments that underlie “a is the right action”. So, at least on Moore’s view, the moral expert is one who has both descriptive and normative knowledge, and that is what underlies knowledge of what action is the right action. However, one could argue that distinctively moral knowledge would simply be the knowledge of the good as well as knowledge of the correct attitude to take toward the good. This would involve judgments of the form “x is good” and “m is the correct approach to the good” so the action that achieves x m-ly is the right action. These two claims are distinctly normative.

The charge against Moore’s view would be that the moral expert may not also be an expert on empirical matters. So, “a causes x” is not a bit of moral knowledge, and a judgment that “a is the right action because a causes x and x is good” is not purely moral. So, the moral expert is the one who is correct about the normative reasons for performing a given action, or correct about what the underlying justifiers are for the action. Thus, if someone holds that an action is justified simply on the basis of respect for autonomy, and another holds that it is justified solely on the basis of limiting the amount of suffering in the world, then one of them, at least, is not a moral expert even though both agree on the policy itself.

Again, this observation has led some to regard moral expertise as a matter of having moral knowledge but also having moral understanding, which is, in turn, distinct from moral knowledge. Though both of the people who offer correct testimony know what the right thing to do is, only one has moral understanding, and that one is the real expert. As I noted earlier, there are varying standards for what this understanding requires, but the most demanding accounts require a great deal in terms of what sort of grasp of the reasons moral understanding involves.
Alison Hills believes that understanding requires systematic knowledge of what these reasons are and how they work together, and an ability to articulate those reasons and explain to others how they justify either the judgment or action. If we identify the moral expert with the fully virtuous person, then expertise in action is also required. All three forms of expertise combine in the moral expert (Hills 2009, 2015). These are very high standards for moral expertise. To take up the linguistic analogy again: the corresponding linguistic expert would be one who speaks grammatically, can recognize violation of grammatical norms, speaks well, and who is a linguist.

The requirement that the moral expert, either in judgment or practice, needs to be able to articulate the reasons that justify the action, is very controversial and has received some attention in the literature on moral expertise. In addition to Alison Hills, Julia Annas has also placed the requirement that the virtuous agent be able to articulate the correct justification for an action and judgment (Annas 2011). Matt Stichter has challenged Annas on this requirement since in part it seems easily subject to counterexample (Stichter 2007). Annas grants that there are skills that people have that don’t seem to require the possession of the ability to articulate and explain the reasons supporting the action, but considers that these are not genuine skills, or at least not skills of the sort that concerned Socrates in developing the skill analogy. Part of Stichter’s criticism is that if one restricts the comparison to “intellectualist” skills, then one is building into the concept the intellectual features that one should have to argue for, they can’t simply be assumed.

It seems that a less intellectualist form of understanding can be developed – for example, as responsiveness to reasons that do not require skill in analysis, as the chicken sorters case illustrates (Arpaly 2002b). There is wide variation in the literature on expertise regarding the nature of moral understanding, or what it is to be “aware of” or “responding to” the right reasons in judgment and action. One can, for example, make use of accounts of reasons responsiveness that are not overly intellectualized, that reject what Errol Lord has referred to as a Conceptualization Condition for reasons responsiveness that requires the reasons responsive agent to possess “mental states whose contents are conceptualized via some normatively relevant contents” and, more specifically, the concepts employed in the correct moral theory (whatever that happens to be) (Lord 2017, 347). This is the account he attributes to Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder. Lord correctly notes that this account is much too intellectually demanding. If this were the correct account view, few of us would ever be acting for the right reasons. His view is that reasons responsiveness that underlies moral creditworthiness is a kind of know-how. Morally good people know how to do the right thing, or the morally good thing, and when they act as an expression of the know how they deserve credit. They care about what is right and good, even if they are not able to deploy the concepts of the correct moral theory, or even partially deploy them. This view has the virtue of being less intellectually demanding, and more realistically covers our intuitions on specific cases, such as cases in which someone, though confused, is clearly acting out of a concern for other people when he sees them suffering. This person would be an expert in practice, and even an expert in judgment, but needn’t be an expert in analysis.

We have already discussed the supposed disanalogy between descriptive and normative expertise. We might also try to understand moral expertise by exploring analogies between different forms of normative expertise. Recently in the literature on testimony, analogies have been drawn between the moral expert and the aesthetic expert. This is an attractive analogy, and has figured into historical discussions of moral norms, particularly with the early sentimentalists. David Hume, for example, often drew on analogies between the aesthetic and the moral. These norms are both based in our sentiments. Their content depends upon human nature. There
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is some form of objectivity with respect to these norms in the sense that there are universal standards that apply to all human beings. But, as in the case of aesthetic claims, moral claims are not true of necessity.

Hume explored the issue of aesthetic expertise in “Of the Standard of Taste” (Hume 1965), arguing that the criteria for aesthetic expertise are that the expert in aesthetic judgment is someone who has good sense, a delicate taste (can detect even small differences), and is free from prejudice. These qualities can carry over to the moral expert. The limit of the moral expert might be thought of as an “ideal observer.” The qualities one thinks are relevant to the ideal observer are the ones the moral expert must have – impartiality, some understanding of the moral reasons at play, and otherwise possessing good sense, or good reasoning abilities. Hume also believed that aesthetic experts practiced making judgments, and made themselves familiar with a wide variety of cases so that they could make informed comparisons.

Some of these criteria are simply developmental and shouldn’t be part of a definition of moral expertise. For example, Hume claimed that experts develop through practice. Many contemporary writers on expertise note this as well. Even if it were true, it is not a necessary condition of expertise that the expert has gone through this process. Rather, it picks out the process by which normal human beings become experts.

34.2 Moral practice

One can also be an expert when it comes to acting morally. That is, certain people possess skills, or know-how, when it comes to acting morally. Just as a violinist possesses the skill, or know-how, in playing music that isn’t simply a matter of possessing propositional knowledge about violin playing. This is distinct from being an expert in judgment, or an expert in analysis. This moral expert in this sense more reliably does the right thing relative to others. Such an expert may not judge the action to be the right one, though, in many cases, judgment and practice expertise coincide.

Recall the developmental point that in order for someone to become an expert that person must practice. Thus, for someone to become an expert pianist that person must practice enough that certain finger movements are completely automatic. They act properly automatically, and that’s a feature of expertise. But, again, this is simply a contingent developmental feature of how expertise is developed in normal human beings. It has nothing to do with the concept of what an expert is. Similarly, how one becomes a bachelor isn’t a question relevant to understanding what a bachelor is.

At least some have thought that this practice involves the non-expert explicitly applying rules to behavior in order to develop the skill. Over time, the action becomes automatic. This does not seem right at all, especially if one finds the analogy with language compelling. This would make the development of moral skill more like the acquisition of a second language. But growing up in social settings gives people plenty of practice in acting morally in normal contexts, and the skill can be developed this way, just as first language use is developed. Others have thought that the developmental picture in psychology has been “one-dimensional” and that expertise is actually “three-dimensional.” Harry Collins (2013) suggests that it isn’t just individuals who are experts, groups can be experts as well. We might get some intuitive support for this by considering claims like, “Plumbers are the experts on pipes.” I’m skeptical that this is much of a difference, however, since it seems that the group is reducible to the individuals, though I concede that there could be cases in which the group possesses expertise that each individual lacks – a kind of higher-order expertise. In any case, he also views the explicit application of rules to the development of expertise to be misguided. Of course, that can happen,
but especially when we look at groups, he argues that knowledge can be transmitted as tacit knowledge. We watch, we absorb. Collins adds that the knowledge possessed by the expert must also be esoteric, in order to distinguish widespread or ubiquitous tacit knowledge from expertise. This is quite different from what I am proposing: on my view, one accepts that there is language-speaking expertise even in situations in which the skill is widespread within society. It is just that expertise is understood contrastively, so that even though all normal adults speak well, they are experts when contrasted with the normal three-year-old.

But Collins’s developmental point is correct. One can just “pick up” certain forms of expertise. I would go further and hold that it seems plausible that some people are born with expertise in some domain (that is, they are not born experts strictly speaking, but they are born with a capacity that they take no active measures to develop, nor is the expertise something that they pick up from their environment). This is certainly conceptually possible, and the way or manner in which someone becomes an expert is not something that figures into what an expert is. How someone becomes a bachelor does not figure into what a bachelor is.

Again, there are many writers on this issue who, for example, connect moral expertise in action with possession of moral virtue. They also require that the genuine expert in action is expert in judgment as well. This requires that the moral expert possesses both abilities, to judge properly better than others in the relative contrast class, and to act rightly more reliably as well.

The classic case used in the literature of someone who acts rightly without understanding why what he did was right, and in fact, actually thinking that what he did was morally bad, is the case of Huckleberry Finn. However, since we are discussing expertise rather than the rightness of actions, imagine a Huck-like character who very reliably acts rightly, responding to the right reasons, but who does not judge or reason correctly about the moral character of his own actions. This would be someone who was an expert moral actor, though not an expert in judgment or analysis. The highly intellectualized views of moral expertise in action would deny that this is a kind of moral expertise (see Bashour, Chapter 37 in this volume). Again, to make this case there is often an appeal to an articulation requirement: Huck is not able to give an account of why his actions are, all things considered, justified precisely because in some of those cases he thinks they are not, all things considered, justified. There is still basic moral understanding, and responsiveness to moral reasons, in the sense that he does understand that he has moral reason to help his friend escape from slavery. He is not clueless about morality, but he has accepted the conventions of his time as moral truths, when in fact they are not.

In this essay the debates surrounding moral expertise in the literature have been sketched and discussed, and an account of moral expertise has been argued for that holds that there are different ways in which someone can be a moral expert, and that some of these do not require that the moral expert possess a full, systematic, understanding of morality. Further, deference to these experts is, in principle, much like deference to experts on descriptive or empirical matters.

Notes
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7 One could argue that this is the nature of the disagreement between Peter Singer and Garrett Hardin on whether or not those in affluent countries to give to famine relief. Compare Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality” to Hardin’s “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor.”

8 See Sarah McGrath, “The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference,” 322 ff. for more on the distinction between pure and impure moral deference.


References


