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MORAL TESTIMONY IS OKAY—BUT SO WHAT? ON THE LIMITS OF MORAL TESTIMONY

INTRODUCTION

It appears that moral testimony has captured the attention of many philosophers, ethicists, and non-ethicists alike, making it one of the most actively discussed topics in contemporary ethics. A quick illustration: in recent years two papers discussing moral testimony and advice won the prestigious Sanders Prize in Metaethics (SLIWA 2025; WODAK 2021). I believe that the current philosophical enthusiasm surrounding moral testimony is exaggerated.

The overarching aim of this paper is to question what I call “the safe” view on moral testimony, which is “okayness of moral testimony” (OMT). It is very simple and says that whenever one feels they need to defer to moral testimony (differences in motivation aside), doing so is simply okay: it does not really harm anyone.¹ Discussions concerning moral testimony are often situated within broader debates about epistemic authority, rational deference, and the legitimacy of relying on the judgments of others in domains where we deem

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¹ It is necessary to stress that the OMT differs substantially from Enoch’s view on “fishiness” of moral testimony (ENOCH 2014). He acknowledges that there is something “fishy” about following moral judgments of others, but nevertheless he believes that deferring to moral experts can be not only permissible but also morally required. His central argument rests on the premise that individuals have a moral obligation to minimize the risk of moral wrongdoing, and in cases where another person’s moral judgment is deemed more reliable, fulfilling this obligation may necessitate relying on their expertise. Enoch defends moral testimony on moral grounds, whereas the OMT discussed in this paper evaluates it in instrumentalist terms, focusing on how effectively it fulfils its intended function—providing sound moral resolutions to others’ ethical dilemmas.

ourselves less competent. A particularly influential account is developed by Linda Zagzebski (2012), who defends epistemic authority by arguing that rational agents may justifiably substitute another person's judgment for their own under appropriate conditions of trust and perceived reliability. My concern in this paper is not primarily with the epistemic rationality of such deference, but rather with whether morally reliable testimony is genuinely successful in resolving the practical and evaluative difficulty faced by the testimony-seeker.

The central idea motivating my criticism of OMT is that genuine harm is not the only sensible reason we disapprove of one action or another, including a speech act like moral testimony. To manifest scepticism about some moral practice, it is enough to demonstrate that it fails to fulfil the role it is supposed to play with ease, which in case of moral testimony, as I shall argue, is providing good resolutions to other people's moral queries. The paper discusses a variety of reasons explaining why moral testimony is not so okay, even if it appears so. Interestingly but, I dare to say, unsurprisingly, most of the reasons in question are not associated with the concept of moral testimony *per se* but rather with substantial assumptions around reliability of moral authorities and moral knowledge. It is one of my aims in this paper to question these substantive assumptions. I shall explore examples already discussed in the literature on the subject-matter of moral testimony to reveal that neither trustworthiness of a person nor moral knowledge secure OMT from my objections. There are three main reasons which I demonstrate to explain why this is so: (i) people who defer to moral testimony need not lack moral knowledge, but may instead experience practical uncertainty, reflective hesitation, or diminished confidence in their own evaluative perspective; (ii) the genuine motivation behind asking for moral testimony, even unaware to the advice-seekers, is not to be told what to, but rather to make sense of their situation. Crudely put, people often seek advice in the hope that articulating their understanding of their circumstances and inclinations will resonate with those they morally admire. Here, I propose—while leaving a more in-depth discussion for another occasion—that their motivation for seeking moral consultation often stems from a desire for what I call “solidarity in reasonableness”. This concept suggests that it matters to us whether we belong to a community of peers where such belonging is defined not by social ties but by shared moral reasoning and the capacity to engage with ethical issues through common moral assumptions. Finally, (iii) sometimes, appearances notwithstanding, there is no moral knowledge that could decisively provide one answer to a moral question. In

addition to the aforementioned reasons, which in my view support at least moderate pessimism² about moral testimony, my arguments also engage with well-known objections already discussed in the relevant literature. Two objections, in particular, stand out. One is that moral testimony is no more than a personal perspective on an issue of a moral nature (e.g. COADY 1995 and MCGRATH 2009),³ and unless its *genuine* relevance to the stance of the testimony-seeker is established, the value of the testimony is indeterminate. Other objection builds on the observation that the reliability of a person who delivers her testimony is no guarantee that it will be in important respects free from moral defects, or at least better from a moral standpoint than the testimony-seeker herself is able to form.⁴ Those who manifest better capacity for moral understanding are not immune to errors, but their errors, I show—in contrast to the mistakes committed by those less talented or less trained in attentiveness to moral aspects—are usually of the opposite nature. According to the view discussed in this paper, errors of reliable advisors usually come from overdemandingness (applying unnecessarily high moral standards where they are not needed), or from overattentiveness to factors of crucial moral significance like fair treatment. Moral knowledge, I hold, often does little good, appearances notwithstanding. Does it mean that the value of testimony is an illusion? No, but if the arguments presented in this paper are on the right track, then it turns out that the genuine value of testimony resides not in what it gives us (feedback translatable into the idea of the right sort of action), but rather in what it leaves us with: a sort of dissatisfaction about the answer. The dissatisfaction with moral testimony is what I consider to be its biggest gift for us since learning its source makes us aware that answers to our ordinary doubts about moral affairs are to be found by us. This conclusion fits well my understanding of Mogensen's (2017) idea of authenticity that at the bottom drives

² The view that moral testimony is deeply troubling and problematic—because the nature of morality demands that we be the sole decision-makers in our own moral affairs—is known as *moral testimony pessimism* (cf. MOGENSEN 2017). This position has numerous proponents, including Crisp (2014), Hills (2009, 2010), Howell (2014), and McGrath (2009, 2011). In this paper, I do not engage with the various forms of moral testimony pessimism, as the primary objection I address against OMT is instrumental in nature: moral testimony too often fails to provide satisfactory resolutions to moral questions.

³ This view is naturally associated with a variety of views supporting moral relativism. See, for example, the classical papers by Harman (1975) or Prinz (2007).

⁴ The number of papers discussing this worry is plenty. See, for example, HILLS (2009), HOPKINS (2007), MCGRATH (2011), HARMAN (2022), DRIVER (2006), STROUD (1998), NICKEL (2001).

our dissatisfaction with the very concept of moral testimony. However, arguing for that conclusion, I leave for another occasion.

1. WHAT IS TESTIMONY AND HOW IT IS LINGUISTICALLY EXPRESSED

Firstly, a brief note on the terminology used in this paper. I employ the term “attestor” to denote a person who gives testimony, and the term “testimony-seeker” to refer to those who turn to reliable persons to hear their moral point of view.

It is interesting to notice that support for moral testimony is usually expressed by highlighting the shortcomings of the so-called no-testimony view. Here is what the no-testimony view (NTV) says in the version proposed by Paulina Sliwa in her 2012 paper:

For a mature agent, there is something wrong with relying on testimony for one’s moral beliefs even if one knows one’s source to be reliable and trustworthy. (176)

In this paper, I shall question the NTV by way of showing that the reliability and trustworthiness of the attestor are not enough to make relying on testimony an uncontroversially good idea. I argue that for testimony to be valuable, three other factors must be satisfied besides the reliability of the attestor: the genuine relevance of the testimony to the case of the testimony-seeker, the testimony’s respecting moral truth in the agent who seeks testimony and, last but not least, the testimony’s honouring to a sufficient degree the moral standards that are relevant and which the attestor recognizes upon hearing the testimony-seeker’s problem.

Before proceeding, it is useful to distinguish three different senses in which moral testimony may be considered successful. Firstly, testimony may be epistemically successful in the sense that it transmits morally reliable judgments or beliefs. Secondly, testimony may be practically successful by helping the testimony-seeker arrive at a stable and contextually appropriate decision regarding what to do. Finally, testimony may be existentially successful in the sense that it honours the testimony-seeker’s deeper values, motivations and sense of authenticity. These dimensions of success need not coincide. A piece of testimony may be epistemically respectable and still fail practically by leaving the testimony-seeker irresolute, or fail existentially by alienating the agent

from what she recognizes as true in herself. The central claim defended in this paper is *not* that moral testimony lacks all epistemic value, but rather that its practical and existential success is often overestimated.

The criticism developed in this paper is directed primarily against robust instrumental conceptions of moral testimony according to which testimony is expected to provide authoritative or decisively action-guiding resolutions to moral problems. I do not deny that moral testimony may have a weaker heuristic, deliberative, or perspectival value. As Karen Jones (1999) observes, moral testimony may contribute to moral reflection not by replacing first-person judgment, but by enlarging the agent's perspective and helping them to reflect more carefully on their own motivations, commitments, and evaluative outlook. My concern is rather that these weaker functions are often conflated with the stronger claim that testimony successfully resolves the practical difficulty faced by the testimony-seeker.

Since to the best of my knowledge the NTV is discussed without prior explanation of what testimony is, let me start by providing a working definition of testimony which accommodates any type of testimony discussed in the philosophical forum, be it moral testimony, normative, aesthetic, or whatever else the reader pleases (whilst keeping in mind that the paper is focused solely on moral testimony). Testimony is a speech act (usually complex) targeted at revealing the speaker's best considered judgment on a particular topic/object based on their knowledge, experience and the various sensitivities involved in forming the judgment in question and which are characteristic of the individual speaker.

According to the proposed definition, my saying to you in loose discussion about whether it is a good idea for you to ask for more financial support from your spouse's parents in the situation where they freely donated to you a huge sum of money: "If the reason for asking them for an additional help is important to you and you feel okay with forming the request, go for it. However, if you feel in your heart that it is not a good idea, at least *at this* moment, then drop it and think about other options" is an instance of moral testimony.

But moral testimony can equally well be conveyed as a short, imperative message:⁵ "Stop tolerating the bullying of your child and inform the school

⁵ Imperative forms of judgments bring confusion since the difference between testimony and advice is not entirely clear. Many authors seem to use these two concepts when discussing the same example, leaving it to the reader to determine which of the two concepts more accurately matches the context of the example. I believe testimony and advice are two separate concepts that are not tightly bound to one another. As will be clear in the main text, according to the view which I favour,

authorities!” It can also be softly introduced into a conversation as when some unconsidered idea pops into your mind, inclining you to reevaluate your current priorities. Consider the following context: the two of us are debating over the duties of an academic and the duties generated by that person’s private goals, and I say to you: “If I were to choose again, I would rather opt for a simple country life, with no high intellectual endeavours, just use my intellectual capacities to the extent that they help me to secure my needs and unsophisticated desires. In that way, I would live aligned with my core values.”

To be fair to the debate over moral testimony, authors like Sliwa⁶ do not present their examples of testimony in dialogue form, so that we could have access to concrete linguistic representations of the respective judgments, but simply report on the message received from the testimony-giver. However, what seems to be clear is that attestors in either Sliwa’s or my own examples use imperative sentences, normative vocabulary or evaluative language, which I take to confirm that my definition of testimony nicely captures the variety of linguistic expressions characteristic of testimony. Below are two examples from Sliwa (2012) illustrating the contexts in which agents seek testimony.

VEGETARIAN: Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, *who tells her 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. (SLIWA 2012, 175–76; my italics)

yet leave unargued in this paper due to lack of space, testimony is just a testimony, a particular person’s outlook on some issue or topic, whereas advice is either an in-depth reflection on an issue, topic or problem offered by one person to another or a practical suggestion how to solve a concrete problem. The key difference between advice and testimony, as both are discussed in the relevant literature, is that advice looks at a problem or a topic either from an objective point of view (THOMPSON 2001, BROOME 2013) or from the position of an advice-seeker, whereas in testimony the focus is on the perspective and reasoning of the testimony-giver. Elsewhere (a paper in progress) I reject the most popular view on advice in which it is either objective or subjective, but nevertheless concrete in the sense that it offers a clear answer to the question of what to do and instead set out a “formal” conception of advice in which good advice is not content, but rather a method of solving a query. My formal account of advice is motivated by a substantive view on the goodness of advice which is achieving answers true in heart.

⁶ In this paper, I shall focus on Sliwa’s defence of testimony and her examples, the reason being that her rejection of testimony is particularly lucid, definitive and rich in supposedly telling examples.

SUIT: Sam is standing at the shore of a lake when he sees a drowning child. He believes that saving the child would be a good thing to do but it would involve ruining his new expensive suit ... so he decides to call a friend whom he takes to be reliable. His friend *tells him that he should save the child*, and he believes him and saves the child. (SLIWA 2012, 176; my italics)⁷

It is important to stress that it is not a mere fact of the attestor's using the relevant sort of wording in the relevant circumstances that imparts moral significance to her judgment. It is, as both examples suggest, an attestor's moral reputation that matters most and which lends authority to her words or, as some also claim, the power to elicit affective⁸ responses in the listeners. Since the reliability of the attestor is considered an essential component of the value of the testimony, let us have a closer look at that factor.

2. UNPACKING TESTIMONY: THE RELIABILITY AND SALIENCE OF TESTIMONY

First of all, it is not easy to say precisely what the reliability of an attestor is. It is beyond controversy, though, that we perceive a person who we deem reliable as having certain qualities such as honesty, love for truth, perceptiveness, empathy, moral sensitivity, impartiality, kindness, etc. Testimony-seekers take these and other qualities they find important, too, to be evidence that their trust in those people's moral judgments is valid. So far, so good. Certainly, we all know people who we consider to be morally superior or more morally talented than us, and a conversation (or consultation) with them illuminates, no doubt, the issue at stake, but does this satisfy many philosophers'

⁷ In the case of this controversial example, I am only concerned with the linguistic form in which the testimony is offered and not in its content. The quotation suggests that the protagonist's friend in response to the query used the normative "ought" and that her judgment was expressed with use of an imperative sentence. That is all that matters for the purpose of my discussion here.

⁸ I do not share the popular view, according to which the attestor's trustworthiness or reliability is powerful enough to elicit affective responses in the hearers (at least not as a matter of principle). And still less that they are powerful enough to cause affective changes that result in the action recommended or suggested by the attestor. I also hold Kant's view that the affective response is not a crucial ingredient of morally worthy action, but arguing for these views here would detract from the main subject. I simply register my disagreement with the view that the judgments of people whom we deem reliable can transform our emotions instantly. I am skeptical about the idea that, say, simply my telling you that cheating on the exam is wrong *generates* the proper affective feeling in you that finally discourages you from cheating on an exam.

expectation that testimony will solve our moral problems or puzzles? Is testimony universally good inspiration in deciding what to do? The view I advance in this paper is that it is not.

Consider an example below, which is a modified and extended version of the example provided by Sliwa in her 2012 paper. It concerns the moral dilemma of an engaged couple, Tom and Sara, who are deliberating⁹ whether it is okay to ask Tom's parents—who have already made a huge financial contribution to the comfortable life of the soon-to-be wife and husband—for more financial assistance.

WEDDING*: Tom and Sara are planning a wedding and the parents of both have offered money to contribute to this event. Sara's family is not very wealthy, but nevertheless have offered an amount of money that covers almost two-thirds of the costs of organizing the ceremony. Sara much appreciates her parents' donation because she knows that they had to sacrifice other financial goals. Tom's parents, on the other hand, are very wealthy and as a wedding present they have promised to buy a house for the freshly married couple. Tom and Sara are extremely grateful for their generosity. Having a beautiful house in the countryside has always been their dream and knowing that this goal is to be achieved so soon and so effortlessly is so amazing that they find it quite a miracle. The young couple have already found a house for sale and started preliminary negotiations with the seller. However, a friend of Tom's parents tells them that he plans to sell his beautiful house since his family has decided to move to Europe. The house is fabulous but at least twice as expensive as the one they have found. Tom and Sara would be happy to live in it and now they are wondering whether it would be permissible for them to ask Tom's parents to help them to buy it. Their concrete worry is whether it would be fair of them to ask for more, even though they know that Tom's parents can afford to help them buy the more expensive house. They decide to ask a friend whose judgment they trust.

After listening to their story, the friend says that it strikes her that the request is too demanding, and she would rather stay happy with the originally chosen house and the promised financial support, which is already very generous. The couple's friend concludes her verdict by saying that wanting too

⁹ I deliberately use different wording than Sliwa's, saying that the two agents in question "deliberate whether" rather than "do not know" (Sliwa) for reasons that will become clear later. For now, it is enough to stress that the words we use to describe a situation do matter since they govern our grasp of what's going on.

much too soon is not good and may be considered greedy. Tom and Sara acknowledge the friend's opinion since they trust her, but Sara feels a bit disappointed. She does not want to be greedy, and after some soul-searching, she finds that her desire for the more expensive house does not arise out of the greed for more. She and Tom simply like the second house more—it is their dream house. They never thought that it could be put on sale when they were looking for a house to buy. Sara feels that not trying to buy it goes against her biggest desires. The sad truth is that having asked for and received moral guidance, she is still torn between starting a conversation with Tom's parents about their potential help and dropping the idea. Moreover, she reads from Tom's face that he shares her indecision on that point. Tom's eyes as Sara's spark with enthusiasm at the mere thought of living in the house of his parents' friend but asking his parents for more money elicits quite a discomfort in Tom. At the end of the day, he shares Sara's disappointment about the advice they have asked for. And still, he feels that he does not know whether they should speak with his parents or not.

Intuitively, there is something very disturbing about Wedding*, but it is not entirely clear from the account what the worry is. I believe it can be plausibly traced to the following: (i) Should Tom and Sara trust the attestor if their heart tells them otherwise? (ii) If Tom and Sara do find their friend a reliable adviser regarding the sort of issue under consideration, shouldn't they be happy about her advice and simply apply it, even against their hesitation? (Didn't they, after all, decide in the beginning that they would not trust their own judgments?) (iii) Didn't Tom and Sara get engaged because they wanted to and not because they allowed for a moral conflict which they might have evaded had they made their own decision following their intuition or—however flawed in their assessment—their own moral sensitivity?

It seems to me that all these apt questions refer us to the key issue in the debate over the value of testimony which, to my mind, has been overlooked and which concerns the relevance of the attestor's reliability and the genuine salience of the testimony to the case at hand. Let me explain what I mean by examining the situation in the Wedding* case.

Tom and Sara decided to consult a friend because they felt they were unable to make a judgment they could trust. Whatever their doubts, they were certain that their friend was reliable. Nevertheless, having heard the testimony, they do not feel that the problem is *solved*. They still have doubts and queries. Interestingly, these doubts and queries concern neither the value of the testimony, nor the value of the attestor. So, what has gone wrong? Are they victims

of internal inconsistency, which they would be if they said, “We accept what you say, but still think you are mistaken”? Or perhaps they together (what a coincidence!) suffer from a similar defect of will: they agree with the attestor’s opinion, but are unable to act on it due to their persistent desire to act against the testimony?

Though, empirically, both inconsistency and weak possibly explain Tom and Sara’s indecision, it seems that they are not the source of the moral discomfort the couple is experiencing. The reason they still feel confused is that they have recognized in their *hearts* that what the attestor says does not take into account a moral perspective according to which asking for more (money, help, attention, etc.) is *okay* as long as the requester is motivated by their genuine desire, knowing that the potential helper will not jeopardise their health, values and other important things if the helper decides to grant their request. Tom and Sara may not be aware of the above-suggested heart-driven reason which explains why they feel irresolute upon being given the testimony, but their being stuck instead of translating into action what they have been told to do is a sign that they know at heart that the testimony is not particularly relevant to their case. It is valuable (the attestor is trustworthy, her reasoning is flawless, etc.), relevant, but –fundamentally– it is not relevant to Tom and Sara’s values, nor is it aligned with their evaluative outlook.

Sara and Tom may not know that their personal values include comfort and luxurious living to a degree that (unconsciously to them) prevents them from assigning importance to the virtue of modesty. In view of how they feel about the situation, which is what they discovered *after* the consultation, there is nothing morally bad in asking for financial support from those who could help them, even if the support in question may strike many people, including their friend, as excessive and inappropriate. Values-relevance impacts virtues-relevance to the effect that the more the personal values depart from what standard morality perceives as morally significant (striving for a luxurious life is not high on the list of appreciated moral goals), they “push away” virtues which standard morality views quite highly (e.g. modesty). An important lesson to be drawn from my considerations of Wedding* is that whether a piece of testimony benefits the testimony-seekers or not crucially depends on the matching relevance of the attestor’s values (and virtues) and the values and virtues *truly honoured* by the testimony-seekers.

Notice that if the proposed explanation of the situation illustrated by the Wedding* dilemma is plausible, then contrary to authors like Sliwa, it also shows that the genuine source of the moral problem in Tom and Sara’s case is

not moral ignorance, at least not *sui generis* moral ignorance: a lack of orientation about what is morally okay and what is not (finally, asking for more money is neither a moral crime nor an offense, and Tom and Sara *know* that much), but rather a lack of understanding of how much they can play with the generosity of Tom's parents without breaching the line of moral taste and incurring vices like greediness or unfairness.

3. PERSONAL RELIABILITY AS A FALLIBLE GUIDE TOKNOWING BETTER IN A CONTEXT

Authors who see good in reverting to moral testimony seem to be influenced by the following reasoning; otherwise it would not be clear what obvious value there is in reliance on testimony.

P1 People deemed morally reliable are morally more talented than those who seek their advice (otherwise asking their help would make little sense).

P2 Those deemed morally reliable enjoy their moral reputation because those who consult them are poorly trained in or lacking the skills that they possess.

C The trained skills and capacity they possess are a hallmark of reliable people and they secure their better moral judgment.

The idea of different “weights of moral judgments” based on differences in skills such as good moral reasoning or abilities such as a profound moral insight used in defending testimony strikes me as dubious and false. In this section I explain why I deem it dubious and in section 4 I prove why it is false.

The considered idea assumes that some people, who we consider moral authorities or morally talented, know better than us what is a morally good or better, or what is a morally bad or worse action to perform in our situation *since* they are more subtle and correct in discerning morally relevant factors. Be that as it may, the crucial question is this: By what standards do they know better? A natural answer is that they know better in the context of the standards of accepted morality in which we have all grown up. What this implies is only that they are better than the rest of us at an efficient application of moral concepts and adjustment of salient moral norms to contexts. That is what their competence, insofar as it is based solely on moral knowledge, consists in.

As impressive as this is, it may not be all that we need. Notice that most moral queries that agents happen to have in their ordinary life are not in the

first place about applying appropriate moral concepts but rather about the accurate understanding of the situational “What’s going on?” This means that you may know better than I when to describe a given situation using the moral term “unfair”, but that knowledge itself is no guarantee that the moral problem which the situation at stake reveals is primarily about injustice, even if the term “unjust” fits the context well. Moral proficiency requires far more than knowledge of what is right and wrong, good and bad; additionally, it demands cognitive acuity in discriminating between factors that do and do not matter, as well as cognitive reticence in passing judgments too quickly in general. In this respect, my concerns partially overlap with Alison Hills’s influential distinction between moral knowledge and moral understanding (HILLS 2009). She argues that possessing correct moral beliefs does not yet amount to understanding why certain moral considerations matter or how they should guide action in context-sensitive situations. However, while Hills remains broadly optimistic about the educative role of moral testimony, my concern is that even morally knowledgeable and reflective attestors may fail to grasp the practical and existential significance that a situation possesses for the testimony-seeker herself. The problem, therefore, is not merely informational insufficiency, but a mismatch between moral judgment and the lived evaluative structure of the agent’s situation.

Interestingly and perplexingly, cautiousness in framing situations with the use of moral concepts is not a virtue manifested by attestors in the examples discussed in the literature, including my own. Notice that in the context of our examples, if moral knowledge (a good attestor’s trademark) is essentially “knowledge-what”, i.e. the sort of knowledge regarding what morality permits and what it does not, as it is intuitive to think, then most ordinary moral queries which we have in our life, such as Sliwa’s Vegetarian example or my Wedding* example, are not queries of that sort. Luckily, we do not face hard moral dilemmas in our daily routine. Rather, to my judgment, most moral queries that we happen to ponder are about the level of conformity between our personal values and the values promoted by the morality we accept *and* which is exemplified (by our assumption) *to a high or the highest degree by those we find morally reliable, or by moral authorities*. If I am correct in my hypothesis, then the source of the problem of the testimony-seekers primarily resides not in epistemic, cognitive or emotional shortcomings, as is suggested in Sliwa’s papers, but either in poor self-trust in one’s cognitive powers (Tom and Sara) or in moral ambition (Eleanor the meat-eater). Crudely put, what appears to be moral ignorance is often better understood as uncertainty about

one's own evaluative perspective or difficulty trusting one's practical judgment.

Authors like Sliwa think differently. For them the reason why people rely on trustworthy friends in solving their personal dilemmas is that they do not know what is morally appropriate in their context, and the testimony is a sensible way out of a practical impasse. I find this view puzzling since in neither the *Wedding** nor *Vegetarian* case, or even in the *Domestic Injustice* (discussed in next section) do the stipulated better moral judgments of attestors appear conclusive in solving the respective query. In the *Wedding**, the attestor's judgment, regardless of its moral value, is simply irrelevant because it is far from clear that fairness or modesty are those virtues that should govern the process of moral deliberation in the discussed case. I have attempted to suggest that they are not and that the process of arriving at a good moral judgment in the situation like the one involving Tom and Sara should rather be pursued not by employing moral concepts that match the situational context, but by targeting the discovery of the truth why Tom and Sara want the other house so much and why they think that what they want to do—ask Tom's parents for more financial support—appears to them morally suspicious. On this reading, once clarity about what they would like to do and why is achieved, it is expedient in the next stage of the process of moral reflection to examine the moral value of the intention that fuels the considered action against the norms and values respected in the society and advocated by reliable attestors.

Notice that under the proposed approach to moral testimony, moral knowledge, when considered the source of the value of testimony, remains insufficiently action-guiding until the attestor gains sufficient understanding of the moral question she is confronted with. Simply put, a responsible attestor suspends judgments until she knows all contextually relevant facts (psychological facts about the testimony-seekers included) because it is the situational knowledge that helps her to understand what moral knowledge it would be wise to employ.

In the case of moral testimony or advice, I hold, contextually salient moral knowledge is built upon the following four factors: (i) the moral profile of the situation that elicits moral concern in the testimony-seeker, (ii) the truth about the testimony-seeker's genuine motivation for seeking testimony, (iii) the testimony-seeker's construal of her situation and the nature of the moral problem she is challenged by, and (iv) the most accurate conceptual framing of the considered moral problem. To sum up, what makes the stipulated better knowledge of the attestor of overestimated significance in the *Wedding** is

that the testimony *precedes* the understanding of the moral problem in a way that honours the testimony-seekers' genuine evaluative perspective. Therefore, the testimony is in important respects irrelevant to the genuine issue at stake. I call the irrelevance in question "methodological irrelevance" since the discussed sort of irrelevance arises out of applying "bad" methodology which here consists in passing a moral verdict on the grounds of moral knowledge whose salience to the context is questionable.

In the meat-eater case, the moral quality of the attestor's judgment is also of little relevance to the real problem Eleanor faces. In these sorts of examples, the irrelevance of the attestor's stipulated better knowledge to the testimony-seeker's query is generic: the attestor is simply in no position to answer the sort of moral worry that the testimony-seeker has. I call the irrelevance in question "generic irrelevance". By "generic irrelevance" I mean cases in which testimony fails because the underlying problem is not the kind of issue testimony can settle at all. As far as I understand the Vegetarian example, whatever opinion on eating meat Eleanor's reliable friend will offer, that opinion does not directly address Eleanor's concern. What she needs to settle is *not* whether morality permits eating meat (which is still permitted and Eleanor no doubt knows that), but whether she is ready to adopt a new and still not widely shared moral standard based on values she has not been bothered about until now. However, the question of what non-obvious moral standards together with the underlying values Eleanor is ready to adopt is not the sort of question that any reliable friend or a moral authority can answer *for* her.

Interestingly, in discussing her meat-eater example Sliwa agrees that Eleanor cannot sensibly expect a testimony obtained from a reliable friend to soothe her moral worry, but the reason she furnishes in support of that conclusion is completely different from mine. Sliwa seems to think that testimony is of generic irrelevance (to use my phrasing) to Eleanor because the testimony misapplies to cases regarding controversial moral issues such as whether eating meat is decisively morally okay or not okay. I hold that Sliwa's claim itself is controversial.

Finally, don't we turn to moral authorities with issues that strike us as difficult or unclear? Leaving aside my doubts about whether or not testimony serves being more educated in the matters that involve divergent moral feelings and opinions, Sliwa's scepticism about the appropriateness of turning to a friend in Eleanor's case stands in conflict with her own account of moral knowledge. To see that, let us first reconstruct her argument for the misem-

ployment of testimony. The argument is unspoken, but if I am not mistaken, it goes as follows:

Testimony misemployed:

P1 Testimony is about transmitting information since it is meant to resolve ignorance (“testimony is primarily a means for sharing information and resolving ignorance”; SLIWA 2012, 184). And we do not resolve ignorance by delivering information of poor epistemic quality.

P2 Controversial questions make room for different, often opposing information.

Conclusion: Testimony is a poor way of dealing with controversial questions.

Now, if the above argument is sound, then Sliwa’s claim about the poor application of testimony to the issue that bothers Eleanor becomes difficult to sustain. Note that if the testimony is about having information (typically, better information), then it is not true that Eleanor’s reliable friend *does not have information* on the issue of Eleanor’s concern (in fact, on the contrary, she has quite a good piece of relevant information, otherwise Eleanor would not turn to her for help). The problem is rather that having received the information from her friend does not much help in solving Eleanor’s puzzle because the query she genuinely faces requires her *personal decision* about whether she is ready to live up to a non-obvious moral standard that requires her dropping a dietary habit. Put differently, as I understand the Vegetarian case, the problem is not about Eleanor’s inability to determine whose information is more trustworthy—that provided by vegetarians or by their opponents—but about Eleanor’s inability to deal with moral issues for which definitive moral knowledge is unavailable. If I am right in my considerations, then Sliwa is mistaken in thinking that Eleanor’s problem is an epistemic problem and concerns the issue of how “to identify who is *right about the particular question* of whether she ought to eat meat” (SLIWA 2012, 187; my italics) since posed that way the question has no answer. Rather, her problem is meta-epistemic: Eleanor does not know that it is in the nature of controversial issues that they do not call for definitive answers. Had Eleanor known what she is ignorant about (i.e. controversial issues are not resolved by referring to knowledge only), she

would not expect her friend to provide a simple solution¹⁰ to her problem. She would understand that the sort of uncertainty she experiences can be resolved not by acquiring moral knowledge, but by understanding that controversial issues require a personal decision, where those decisions are based on values the agents are *ready* to honour.

4. MORAL KNOWLEDGE, MORAL EMBARRASSMENT AND MORAL AMBITION

In the previous sections, I argued that the Vegetarian and similarly the Wedding*, contrary to what philosophers like Sliwa believe, do not exemplify cases in which seeking testimony is motivated by the respective agents' crucial shortcomings in moral knowledge. Tom and Sara are not afraid that by asking Tom's parents for more money, they will do something *morally bad* (even if by some strict moral code asking the donors for more is inappropriate). Their discomfort arises because they *feel* that their understanding of what is morally permissible in their context does not correspond to the prevailing understanding of what is morally appropriate in a context like theirs, and importantly also departs from virtues praised for the sort of situation in which they are. Their friend's judgment only confirms that their feeling of awkwardness did not arise out of the blue. The fact that they feel moral disorientation indicates that their moral compass operates well—I mean, they at least have a good understanding of the moral norms and virtues highly respected in their society. There is a difference between doing what morality makes room for and doing what is morally right. The former requires not breaching any of the evident moral norms, whereas the latter requires arriving at an appropriate moral decision. Tom and Sara may be unable to form the best moral judgment about what they should do, nevertheless, in revealing the inclinations they have, they still prove not to stand in conflict with morality. And that is enough to demonstrate that moral ignorance is not their defect.

Returning to the Vegetarian, if we suppose that my considerations are sound and that Eleanor does not experience a moral challenge because she does not possess the sort of knowledge that might have prevented her from

¹⁰ Let us, for a moment, put aside the issue whether any information can solve any problem, though the question calls for an answer because if testimony, as Sliwa proposes, is information, then we justifiably expect to receive a story about how the information aka testimony becomes or delivers a solution to an agent's moral query.

encountering the problem she faced, then Eleanor knows enough to decide for herself whether eating butter chicken is morally okay or not. So why does she ask a reliable friend for her opinion? My answer is that she acts out of *moral ambition*, even if she remains unaware of that fact. To advance my claim, let us examine her situation in depth.

Eleonora loves eating meat meals, but as we learn from the context, she is *concerned with moral issues* and notices that eating meat has become morally controversial these days. The possibility that sticking to her eating habits is a possible path to a moral decay causes her discomfort and explains why she finally turns to a reliable friend to listen to her perspective. Eleanor asks for the friend's judgment because she wants to check whether her friend's moral standards allow for eating meat (for other reasons than medical ones). It seems plausible to think that Eleanor's friend embodies a person who lives by sufficiently high moral standards (at least in Eleanor's judgment) and that explains why she consults *exactly* her.¹¹

My view is that the Vegetarian example is particularly useful in exposing the unconscious drive for *morally ambitious* choices because, as Sliwa rightly observes, "the question whether it's wrong to eat meal is a controversial question: it's something even intelligent, well-informed and thoughtful people disagree on" (SLIWA 2012, 187). Given there is no single, generally reliable moral stance on eating meat and that one is intent on being as morally accurate as she can, a person such as Eleanor, on my take of her case, has no better option than to rely on the testimony of the most morally reliable person she knows. Why? Evidently, not because she believes that her friend *knows* the truth about whether eating meat is morally good, bad or perhaps neutral (finally, being up to date with moral topics on the agenda among her peers she *knows* that there is no easy and objectively true answer to that question!). She asks her friend because she feels that moral standards her friend will allude to before passing her judgment on the issue of Eleanor's interest are of "the right level", so to speak, of the level that Eleanor expects them to be, as long as she admires the moral sensitivity of that friend. Therefore, as I understand Elea-

¹¹ Here, in company of Sliwa and many other writers, I assume that people who experience the sort of confusion Eleanor does in the Vegetarian situation tend to turn for testimony or advice to reliable persons, who they expect to give them an unambiguous answer. This assumption tells us many important things about our understanding of moral testimony and advice (both are considered to provide unambiguous perspectives or recommendations). Notice that in Sliwa's example the attestor does not say that because the issue is complicated, there exists more than one answer to the question of whether one ought to become a vegetarian for ethical reasons or not. The attestor admits controversy, nevertheless she takes a stand in keeping with her values.

nor's situation, her request for testimony is not so much motivated by her desire to eliminate ignorance and learn once and for all whether eating beef steaks is permissible or not, but by her moral ambition to broaden her perspective on the issue she has never previously considered particularly morally troubling.

Thus, I believe Eleanor's problem does not exemplify a case of moral ignorance, but rather a case of *moral embarrassment*. This does not denote shame in the ordinary sense, but rather reflective discomfort arising from tension between established norms and emerging evaluative commitments. Moral embarrassment, I contend, appears when an agent recognizes whether what they would like to do is in keeping with the relevant general moral norm, but they are also aware of two other things that push their deliberation in opposing directions and which finally cause their mental confusion: one is that the norm in question is controversial due to civilizational improvements (there's no fact of the matter that would objectively demonstrate whether eating meat is morally okay or not) and, importantly, that there are people who she regards as moral authorities and who emphatically advocate against actions permitted by the controversial norm (eating meat is morally permissible).

Now, it follows that Eleanor knows that eating meat is still permissible by the moral code of her society, but as a person interested in new moral trends, she notices that eating hamburgers is no longer a thing that leaves the people around her neutral. Moreover, and more confusingly for her, she has close friends who she finds more competent than herself in moral affairs and who are vegetarians. It is no wonder, then, that she is confused and embarrassed. Who would like to be in her shoes? However, it is one thing not to know what the morality she generally subscribes to says on the issue of her concern (in fact, the permissibility of eating meat is within the grey area, leaving the decision to individuals) and quite another to not to know how to behave if familiar moral norms she has been comfortable with until now are challenged by moral considerations that seem more fitting in the conditions of modern-day civilization.

To sum up, if I am right in my interpretation, then Eleanor's moral discomfort around the subject of eating meat reveals that she suffers neither from a cognitive shortcoming nor from poor moral insight. Rather, what the example shows is that Eleanor has a fully functional moral compass that manifests itself in an emotional reaction of awkwardness, which is misinterpreted as a sign of ignorance but ultimately leads her towards mature moral reflection, enabling her to identify "grey" areas in the moral code she lives by. This is because Eleanor has

sufficient moral knowledge: she knows that her preference for beef steaks is not outright wrong but also no longer morally neutral that she feels a need to know better on the issue at stake. And it can be safely assumed that her desire to know better is driven by her desire to act in a morally better manner. But then, her request for moral testimony seems to be motivated by (commendable) *moral ambition* rather than by ignorance.

5. THE ILLUSION OF A BETTER JUDGMENT

In section 2 I presented an argument showing that the reliability of the attestor (measured by the attestor's better moral judgment due thanks to their better knowledge) does not stand up to criticism because it often happens that, as in the discussed examples, the judgment is not relevant to the testimony-seeker's case (recall my discussion of two sorts of irrelevance: methodological and generic). For that reason, I claimed that the argument from moral knowledge is dubious. In this section I vindicates the second of my claims presented in the above-mentioned section, namely that *it is simply not true that moral knowledge secures better moral judgments*. To this end, I shall consider a couple of examples, again either borrowed from Sliwa, or my own, yet similar to the examples which she discusses in her papers.

These examples are meant to illustrate two sorts of defects, so far undetected in the literature, which I believe illustrate the idea of better knowledge assigned to reliable attestors. One such defect I call "moral overattentiveness" (MOA) and the other "moral overdemandingness" (MOD). MOA often implies MOD, but in my examples it does not. I shall discuss these two shortcomings following from "knowing better" in turn.

5.1 WHEN MORAL KNOWLEDGE LEADS TO WRONG MORAL JUDGMENTS

In her 2023 Sanders-prized paper, Sliwa introduces an example of a couple, Sara and John, who due to Sara's childbirth decided to reorganize their professional and domestic life. Here's the necessary background: Sara used to have a prestigious job in consulting which she decided to leave for a few years to look after their children. The way Sliwa presents the case suggests that both of them agreed upon the following two things: (i) it is a good idea for Sara to take a break from her work and devote herself to home care and the care of

the children because early childhood is instrumental in creating genuine mother–child bonds; in addition, Sara does enjoy the idea of being a mother at home with her offspring; (ii) Sara’s staying at home with the children allows the couple to maintain economic comfort since professional childcare of the standard they like is expensive.

However, after some time of being a full-time mother, Sara is exhausted and her irritation with the domestic affairs increases. However, after some time as a full-time mother, Sara becomes exhausted, and her irritation with domestic affairs increases. Although Śliwa does not specify why, Sara somehow feels guilty about feeling the way she does. Perhaps she thinks that by not accepting the demands of being solely responsible for the day-to-day care of their children she fails to meet the criteria for being a good mother that she has internalized? Perhaps she is also afraid of how her partner John will react to her growing discomfort about the division of duties between them, and consequently how her dissatisfaction will impact their partnership? Anyway, at the end of the day, Sara talks to a trusted friend and depicts her situation, being forthright about her feelings of irritation, frustration and anger for John who returns home from work and expects Sara to be eager to hear about his tribulations at work on that day. The friend tells Sara that she perfectly understands her frustration and that it is no wonder that she feels bad about her situation. The friend draws Sara’s attention to the following facts:

1) It is not only John who works because she works, too. The fact that one of them (John) has an externally renowned job and she takes care of the children and home does not matter. In the friend’s opinion Sara’s work deserves recognition and appreciation because now Sara is being treated unfairly.

2) If Sara feels exhausted and taken advantage of, it is because she is being abused: emotionally, through a lack of concern for her emotional well-being, and physically, overwhelmed by with duties, etc.

Finally, the friend suggests that Sara have an honest conversation with John.

Now, let’s call her example DOMESTIC LABOUR. Śliwa rightly observes that what the friend does is modify Sara’s perception of her situation. The friend does this by suggesting “certain concepts to frame her experience with (care work, emotional labour, fairness) (ŚLIWA 2025, 4) and by offering some suggestive metaphors, mental images and analogies. This is where the beauty of moral testimony lies: in learning new concepts that adequately describe the testimony-seeker’s situation and in the method of learning them in such a compelling way—by employing imagination and mental experiments.

However much I agree with Sliwa's reconstruction of the phenomenology of learning through testimony, I part company with her regarding the value of the hermeneutical advice¹² produced¹³ that way. I think that the moral expertise of Sara's friend is in important respects inadequate, false and ultimately wrong. Let me explain why I think so.

Firstly, on the grounds of what we are told in Sliwa's example: Sara agreed to try a new lifestyle of her own will. Noticing that fact is important because it justifies an expectation that Sara is free to change her mind and communicate to John that she no longer feels comfortable with their previous decision. Being aware of this fact is critical to understanding her situation as it is, without the distortions caused by hasty moral interpretations. What the agreement shows is that no matter how bad Sara feels about her situation now, she is not a *victim* of it. Rejecting the label of victim as one which adequately captures her situation allows us to notice that she has the power to do something about it to feel better. Importantly, starting the moral reflection on the discussed example by granting the fact that Sara's prior agreement to the organization of her life as a mother does not prevent us from noticing that the decision no longer benefits her.

It is just like learning a terrain where one stands. To continue the geographical metaphor, the recognition that one stands on a cliff does not mean that one will inevitably fall. It is a simple observation that falling is one of the options if the person on the cliff does not move backwards, away from the drop. Applying this to Sara's situation, my metaphor reveals that accepting the truth about facts opens a path to the change that honours the truth for Sara. And the truth is that Sara is not "abused", neither is she treated unjustly, if we use these words responsibly. "Abuse" and "injustice" are big moral words. From the Oxford Dictionary we learn that the verb 'to abuse' is used as referring to a person who "uses power or knowledge wrongly", which means that a person who abuses another or does injustice to another intentionally exploits that person's vital forces, skills, talents, etc. But is it fair to say that John exploits his partner Sara? Well, from the story we know he does not. It looks

¹² "Hermeneutical advice" is Sliwa's trademark, a name of her own invention for testimonial transaction between the attestor and her audience intended to transmit to the testimony-seeker not just beliefs about the considered situation, but the entire moral perspective it encompasses, which consists in proposing certain moral concepts, passing suggestive mental images, comparisons, analogies, etc. See SLIWA (2025, 3).

¹³ The word "production" strikes me as accurately describing the phenomenon of preparing hermeneutical advice. The concept of production connotes making something out of elements that are intentionally chosen and well-qualified.

like he is simply unaware of how exhausting and demanding the duties Sara took on her shoulders are (recall that Sara has not yet communicated to him how she feels about the whole situation at home).

Of course, it would be wonderful if John were attentive to the change in his partner—Sara's tiredness, poor condition, lack of humour, etc.—and asked how he could be useful. It would also be great if he had some historical knowledge about gender inequality or the second wave of feminism. Nevertheless, building a moral perspective on crude moral qualifications (unfair, abuse, domestic injustice, etc.) without careful reflection on whether the context justifies applying them strikes me as a philosophically problematic moral interpretation. Moral concepts evoke emotions: if you hear that you are abused or treated unjustly, you feel anger and it simply does not matter what is the true source of your anger. If the attestor had not provided Sara with a clear account of what her situation was really like, she might have had the opportunity to understand the true source of her negative emotions. By my lights, these emotions have little to do with what the other person—her partner—does to her and everything to do with what she does to herself by failing to acknowledge the changing truth of her own situation: what she felt and wanted when she agreed to stay at home is no longer what she feels and wants now—that she no longer finds their prior agreement conducive to her well-being.

Continuing the path of acquainting Sara with the truth in herself the attestor could, as a next step, draw her attention to two important aspects of her situation, logically bound up with her prior recognition of her agency, and that is essentially paired with her responsibility for making her life look the way she wants. The two aspects in question are nicely exposed by looking at Sara's attention to some conceptual work around the notion of agreement. "To agree on something" does not imply to agree eternally. One has the perfect right to cancel one's agreement if one feels the agreement has ceased to support one's good. But—and this is the second salient aspect associated with the notion of agreement—the termination of an agreement or dissatisfaction about it requires communication with the other party to the agreement. Since in Sara's case we are not talking about neutral agreement as one between a seller and a buyer, communication with John requires tactfulness and empathy since the topic essentially impacts their partnership. Negotiations regarding the arrangement of domestic duties is not an easy subject for the members of the household.

In Sliwa's example, the attestor chose a different approach, though. Instead of portraying Sara's situation first with use of neutral concepts like agreement

or agency, so that they together could reach more clarity about the nature of the considered moral problem, she went boldly onto straightforward moral qualification. That strikes me as irresponsible and harmful. But let me be clear in what I claim. Whereas I am critical of the friend's testimony, I do not deny the reliability of Sara's friend. I am fine assigning good intentions to her in desiring to help, but also eager to assume that she acts in accordance with the truth in herself. Instead, what I am suggesting is only that moral knowledge and appraisable intentions do not prevent the attestor's judgment from moral flaw.

Suppose that my interpretation of the true problem in Sara's case convinces you. Now, you may wonder what my interpretation says about the relationship between a person's reliability (her having good moral knowledge) and her passing a reliable moral judgment. Here is what I think: reliability associated with moral knowledge often leads us astray because it inclines towards easy qualifications and as a result risks throwing the "moral" baby out with the bath water, meaning that the attestor (unintentionally) fails to carefully understand the situation at hand. And that is not surprising since it is often the case that morally knowledgeable people tend to consider any given situation through lenses tuned to detect all possible moral threats. If we add to this picture the fact that the attestor is a real person who, as we all are, is not perfect and prone to error, bias and misunderstanding, we have good reason to become more cautious in perceiving testimony as a vehicle of an undefective grasp on a moral situation.¹⁴

5.2 TESTIMONY AND KNOWING *FOR* SOMEONE

Above we have witnessed a shortcoming in testimony, referred to by me as the "overattentiveness problem". In a nutshell, the OP spots a risk coming from too much moral knowledge which, paired with the individual experience of the possessor of that knowledge, often leads to a distorted moral perspective in the lack of any morally controversial intentions or motives on the part of the agent of moral knowledge. The outcome is that a reliable person does her best to transmit her deliberate moral point of view, yet the transmission fails

¹⁴ There are studies showing that people, regardless of the level of their moral competence, tend to interpret situations involving moral queries under the influence of their past, hard experiences regarding similar issues, which results in them tending to be negatively biased in their verdicts. A quick illustration: to a person who as a child was rejected by a close friend, all responses from friends which are opposite to that expected are considered as betrayal.

to deliver the intended result because the attestor's best moral judgment¹⁵ on the issue at stake is far from being best morally.

We should now turn to another possible shortcoming of testimony based on moral knowledge—undue moral overdemandingness. Again, to illustrate the problem I have in mind, let us start from an example and ponder Gina's situation.

SCIENTIFIC CAREER. Gina is a highly promising astronomer. She is young but talented and she easily wins all the grants and fellowship she applies for. Her research is valuable and appreciated by experts in her discipline. Recently, and quite unexpectedly, she was offered a job in the most prestigious research centre in the world. She is extremely happy because she has not received her PhD yet and the offered position is much more superior to what a PhD candidate might expect. She was sent a preliminary contract in which she read her professional duties. In short, the contract is for five years and it is very ambitious and demanding but very well-paid. Gina is excited, but upon deeper reflection she realizes that she is afraid of letting her best years pass during which she will be stuck in the observatory. She knows that she has a big chance of becoming one of the most prominent astronomers in the world, perhaps the most influential woman astronomer in her generation (that thought particularly pleases her, to be honest), but she does not want to miss personal happiness. Since she is torn whether to accept the offer and not, she asks her supervisor, who she greatly admires on moral and professional grounds. She is told that great minds should use their genius to make the world a better place, which in her case is to develop the project about which she feels an enormous potential.

Suppose that Gina intellectually shares the opinion of her supervisor. This is how she has always seen the role of giants in science, but the truth is that she does not *feel* that way. More precisely, at this point in her career she does not consider herself to be influential enough in her discipline to create her own trademark, at least not of the size her professor tells her that she has a real chance to create. Moreover, crucially, when Gina attempts to imagine her ideal life, she sees herself surrounded by children and pets, and with a beloved partner by her side—not as a distinguished expert who sits in an observatory

¹⁵ Here I deliberately write "best moral judgment", leaving it unqualified so as to suggest an objective rather than a subjective reading because the latter makes little sense in the context. It seems natural to assume that the attestor gives her best judgment, meaning: the best judgment she is capable of forming at that particular moment, given the circumstances.

and leads in her discipline. It is not the case that she considers trading her career as a scientist for being a wife and mother: she simply wants to be satisfied in both areas of her life. And to be honest with herself, at the moment in which the offer came she more often thinks about her personal affairs than astronomy. Nevertheless, upon hearing the opinion of her supervisor, she contemplates his words in her head and sinks into confusion since she knows him well and trusts his wisdom. Perhaps in suggesting her taking the path of hard work now, he knows that this is good because she is young and still has time for “serious” decisions about marriage and reproduction.

Let us assume that because Gina trusts her supervisor more than her intuition, she accepts the job offer. She may rest happy and be thankful to the attestor for suggesting that decision or not, but we do not know. What interests me is the value of the testimony in Gina’s case. I have qualms about it. The reason for my worry, as in the previous examples, is that the attestor, under the veil of moral knowledge, delivers reasoning which strikes me as morally illegitimate for them to convey. “Illegitimate” is a strong moral word, I know, but I use it on purpose.

The unjustified reasoning, I contend, starts with adopting an illegitimate premise about what is good for the testimony-seeker in a way that underestimates the role of the testimony-seeker’s current set of values. The professor praises Gina’s scientific talents, believing that developing her intellectual capacities is the central value she *should be* loyal to and transmits to her that very belief. But this belief is based on *his* understanding of the moral duties of remarkable scientists. Even Kant was more liberal, thinking that developing one’s natural talents is an imperfect duty, meaning that the estimation of the degree to which it is to be satisfied is left to a particular individual to settle. The problem with the testimony in the considered example looks subtle but it is not. In the testimony, the professor missed Gina’s perceived (and communicated) desire for forms of personal fulfilment extending beyond professional accomplishment.

But why make such a moral fuss about it if, you might ask, from the neutral perspective he seems to be right? Finally, since Gina is not yet in her thirties, is it not true that she has enough time to be a mother and wife? Well, the problem is not that he assumed a false proposition about the reproductive potential of Gina, to put it bluntly, but that in his moral judgment he did not honour the truth of Gina’s heart. As my example shows, the Professor did not refer to her concerns and feminine wishes, but simply took for granted their

unimportance relative to the potential noble achievements of her being a “total” scientist, obsessed with her scientific results. How morally good is that?

The lesson from my considerations is that moral knowledge, which skillfully navigates moral concepts and fitting moral norms, does not guarantee best moral judgments. If my elucidations in this paper are on the right track, it turns out that things are worse and moral knowledge guarantees even less than better moral judgment! This pessimistic conclusion stems from the realisation that what happens in the examples of Sara and Tom (Gina’s), who all rely on testimony, is in fact failure to honour the moral truth one recognizes within oneself.

CONCLUSION

Moral testimony is popularly presented as being morally okay, if often not the best option for an agent who faces a moral problem which she is uncertain about how to solve. Testimony offered by reliable persons has been praised for many advantages: helping to get out of a moral impasse, minimizing the risk of making a worse moral judgment, educating testimony-seekers in identifying the morally relevant factors of a situation, and bringing some relief at the far end. The purpose of this paper is not to deny the above-mentioned benefits derived from relying on testimony from reliable people, but rather to expose an underexplored risk of cheering over it.

The risk in question, paradoxical as it sounds, is associated with what I have called “okayness”. I have attempted to show that very often in the so-called “ordinary moral affairs” the possibility of relying on testimony may nevertheless result in practically unsuccessful moral judgments. The friend’s testimony in the case of Tom and Sara strikes us as okay, yet had the couple decided to follow it, the impression that something had gone wrong would be unsurprising. The same observation, I contend, applies to the situation of Gina. Sara and John’s case is more complicated because of the complexity of the delivered testimony. Insofar as the testimony suggests Sara should speak sincerely with her partner about what in the organization of their domestic affairs bothers her, it is unproblematically okay, but when it comes to making Sara aware of the nature of their problem—domestic injustice, it is problematic since here moral judgment is based on an overly theory-laden interpretation of her situation. Only Eleanor’s case stands out because here the okayness

of the testimony does no harm since it is completely irrelevant to Eleanor's genuine query.

None of the arguments presented in this paper implies that moral testimony lacks value altogether. The considerations developed here leave room for a more modest conception of testimony: not as a mechanism for outsourcing moral judgment, but as a reflective and dialogical practice that may help agents better articulate their situation, motivations, and evaluative commitments. Testimony may therefore possess heuristic, hermeneutical, or existential value even when it fails to deliver decisive practical resolution.

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MORAL TESTIMONY IS OKAY—BUT SO WHAT? ON THE LIMITS OF MORAL TESTIMONY

SUMMARY

This paper critically examines what I call the "okayness of moral testimony" (OMT), namely the view that deferring to morally reliable testimony is generally unproblematic whenever agents experience moral uncertainty. I argue that contemporary defences of moral testimony often overestimate its practical significance. Even when moral testimony is epistemically respectable, reliable, and well-intentioned, it frequently fails to resolve the practical and evaluative difficulty that motivates agents to seek testimony in the first place. Through a discussion of examples drawn primarily from Paulina Sliwa's work, I argue that testimony-seekers often suffer not from straightforward moral ignorance, but rather from practical uncertainty, value conflict, or lack of confidence in their own evaluative perspective. I further suggest that moral expertise itself may distort judgment through moral overattentiveness and overdemandingness. The paper concludes that although moral testimony can possess heuristic or reflective value, its utility in the resolution of moral problems is often overstated.

Keywords: moral testimony; moral knowledge; moral understanding; epistemic authority; moral uncertainty; Sliwa

ŚWIADECTWO MORALNE JEST W PORZĄDKU, ALE CO Z TEGO?
O GRANICACH ŚWIADECTWA MORALNEGO

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule poddaję krytycznej analizie stanowisko, które określam mianem „dopuszczalności świadectwa moralnego” (okayness of moral testimony, OMT), zgodnie z którym opieranie się na moralnie wiarygodnym świadectwie zasadniczo nie sprawia problemu zawsze wtedy, gdy podmiot doświadcza niepewności moralnej. Twierdzę, że współczesne obrony świadectwa moralnego przeceniają jego praktyczne znaczenie. Nawet jeśli świadectwo moralne jest epistemicznie wiarygodne, rzetelne i udzielane w dobrej wierze, często nie pozwala przewyciężyć praktycznych i ewaluacyjnych trudności, które skłaniają podmioty do poszukiwania takiego świadectwa. Odwołując się przede wszystkim do przykładów omawianych przez Paulinę Śliwę, argumentuję, że osoby poszukujące świadectwa moralnego zazwyczaj zmagają się nie ze zwykłą niewiedzą moralną, lecz z niepewnością o charakterze praktycznym, konfliktem wartości lub brakiem zaufania do własnego osądu wartościującego. Sugeruję ponadto, że sama ekspertyza moralna może prowadzić do zniekształcenia sądu przez nadmierną koncentrację na aspektach moralnych oraz nadmierny rygoryzm moralny. Artykuł kończę wnioskiem, że choć świadectwo moralne może pełnić istotną funkcję heurystyczną i refleksyjną, jego użyteczność przy rozstrzyganiu problemów moralnych bywa często przeceniana.

Słowa kluczowe: świadectwo moralne; wiedza moralna; moralne rozeznanie; autorytet epistemiczny; niepewność moralna; Śliwa