

Future Selves and Present Moral Philosophers: Our Epistemic Superiors in Moral Matters

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Abstract

Moral expertise requires a level of reliability in moral matters that is significantly higher than that of the average person. I argue that this requirement of epistemic superiority in moral matters is sometimes fulfilled by our future selves and generally fulfilled by present moral philosophers. Our future selves are more reliable in answering moral questions than we are when they have been prepared to answer those questions by various epistemic activities. But if our future selves are our epistemic superiors in such cases, moral philosophers are epistemic superiors in moral matters more generally since their epistemic advantages are even more significant. I conclude by arguing that moral philosophers plausibly even qualify as moral experts.

Keywords: Moral Experts; Expertise; Epistemic Superiority; Moral Philosophers; Identifying Experts

1 Introduction

It would be of great epistemic as well as moral significance if we could identify moral experts. Due to their high reliability, the beliefs of experts can guide us in complex subject matters, helping us to form accurate beliefs where our own judgment could easily go wrong. Of course, not all subject matters of expertise are of relevance for all of us – maybe, for example, you were never interested in Celtic languages or the mating habits of deer. In that case, the identification of the relevant experts would be of questionable value for you. Things are different with morality. What one ought to do is of relevance for everyone, and whether certain acts are morally right or wrong is (usually) not indifferent to us. What is more, we *ought* to ensure that we have accurate beliefs about morality since otherwise we might easily act morally wrong.

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Therefore, even if we were not interested in morality, we would still have strong *moral* reasons to try to identify moral experts.²

However, unlike in many other domains, it is not clear whether there are any moral experts at all. Indeed, there are many *prima facie* problems for the view that there are moral experts which have been extensively discussed in the literature. For example, it has been discussed whether the amount and stability of disagreement about moral matters shows that there is no moral expertise (e.g. Archard 2011 and Cross 2016), and whether morality is objective enough to make expertise about it possible (e.g. McConnell 1984 and Cowley 2005). In comparison to the discussion of such problems, the task of making a positive case for the existence of moral experts, which Peter Singer (1972a) prominently conducted a couple of decades ago, seems rather neglected.³ To make such a positive case which exposes the intuitive plausibility of moral expertise is the main goal of this essay. I will also argue for the stronger claim that moral philosophers and (in a sense) our future selves often qualify as moral experts – or at least as our epistemic superiors in moral matters.

2 Epistemic Superiority

Subtleties aside, I think that there is a rather clear sense of “moral expertise” that people (including most philosophers) have in mind when asking and critically discussing whether there are (or could be) any moral experts. At least an essential part of that question is whether there are people who systematically reach more accurate beliefs than others about moral questions such as what you ought to do (in a certain situation) or whether a certain type of action is permissible, right, or wrong. Perhaps, we could add axiological questions about what things or

² That does not mean that we ought to *defer* to moral experts once we have identified them; there are also other ways in which expert beliefs could help us with forming accurate beliefs. For example, we could consider their beliefs as higher-order evidence that we aggregate with our own first-order evidence on the moral proposition at issue. I cannot discuss here which exact response to the beliefs of moral experts is most appropriate, but simply ignoring them would be both epistemically irrational and morally irresponsible. At the very least, we should respond to diverging beliefs of moral experts by questioning our own beliefs and rethinking the moral issue.

³ That is not to say that most of the literature argues against the view that there are moral experts. A substantial part of the literature defends the view that there are moral experts by arguing that the *prima facie* problems of that view are not severe problems after all. For instance, Archard (2011) argues that both *prima facie* problems mentioned above cannot constitute strong arguments against the existence of moral experts – and the argument against the existence of moral experts that he provides himself is in turn rejected by Gordon (2014). My claim is only that there are comparatively few positive arguments for the existence of moral expertise.

states are (intrinsically) good or bad. Using the notion of reliability instead of the level of accuracy that a person systematically reaches, we can put the question as follows:

Epistemic Superiority in the Moral Domain: Are there any people who are significantly more reliable than the average person in answering questions about the moral status of actions (as well as the value of states)?

According to common definitions of moral expertise (e.g. McGrath 2008, 97 and Driver 2006, 629), this question is more or less equivalent to the question of whether there are any moral experts. However, it is sometimes suggested to add further necessary conditions to the definition of moral expertise (e.g. Cholbi 2007). Whether there are (or should be) any further conceptual requirements besides epistemic superiority and which they might be, is a nontrivial question that I won't be able to answer in this essay. For that reason, I will focus on the question of *Epistemic Superiority in the Moral Domain* which reflects at least an essential part of our interest in moral expertise and should be of interest independently of any conceptual intricacies. At the end of the essay, I will present some considerations about potential further requirements for moral expertise.

3 Future Selves

I suspect that one source of resistance against the view that there are moral experts is that we don't *like* the idea that there are others who are our epistemic superiors in moral matters since then there would be at least some pressure to defer to their judgement about what we ought to do. Julia Driver, who suggests a similar diagnosis of our reluctance to ascribe moral expertise, notes that, for this reason, "to many, acceptance of moral expertise might mean a loss of control" (2006, 640). There is, however, a group of people with regard to whom we don't have the worry of losing control (or other preferred states) by ascribing moral expertise to them. This group of people are our future selves. So, in order to avoid possible biases, let us first focus on those and ask whether our future selves might be our epistemic superiors in moral matters.

Consider a decision that you once made (or are in the process of making) which you considered both important and eligible for moral evaluation. That decision could be, for example, whether it is morally permissible to accept a certain job offer, how much you ought to give to charity, and to which charity, or whether you ought to become vegetarian. If, as it is

often the case, you were not sure from the beginning how you ought to decide, you probably did not try to immediately make your final judgement about what you ought to do, but instead prepared in various ways to be able to make a better, more accurate judgement in the future. That preparation usually includes elements like acquiring empirical information that seems morally relevant; thinking about whether the acquired information is really morally relevant and if so, how it is; weighing the different moral considerations; thinking about analogous moral cases; wondering if you might be biased in some way (e.g. due to self-interest); considering the moral decision from different perspectives; discussing your thoughts with other people whose judgment you respect; and so on. At the end of this extensive preparation, how do you stand epistemically in relation to your past self who just started wondering how she ought to decide? Most plausibly, you are epistemically superior to her with regard to the moral question at issue; you are now more likely to answer that question accurately.

This is both what we expect when we decide to undertake an epistemic preparation and what we usually believe at the end of that preparation: Why do we decide to conduct all these troublesome and time-consuming activities before making our moral decision? Because we expect the preparation to significantly improve our epistemic position with regard to the question of how we ought to decide. The point of the preparation is, so to speak, to create a future self that is our current epistemic superior. If we did not become more reliable in expectation, the preparation would be pointless.

The epistemic progress that we made during the preparation process is often transparent after its completion. We often see that our first intuitive reaction to the moral question was inadequate in many respects: that it was based on tenuous information; that it was partial or biased in some other way; that we completely missed an important moral consideration; and so on.⁴ That does not mean that at the end of our preparation it is always (or even usually) *obvious* to us how we ought to decide. On the contrary, the preparation sometimes lets us recognize that it is not all that clear how we ought to decide, as we naively believed in the beginning. But also a transition from a naïve, overconfident judgement to a moderate degree of belief that adapts to the complexity of the moral situation is conducive to one's expected accuracy and reliability.

⁴ Since we can often point to such specific epistemic improvements, it is not plausible that we merely display overconfidence when judging ourselves to be epistemically superior to our former selves. Further, we don't have to solely rely on the first-person perspective that we have after the preparation process. As argued, the epistemic superiority of future selves is also what we expect before the preparation process and what seems to be plausible from a third-person perspective. So we have three distinct (although not fully independent) epistemic perspectives which converge on the same judgement.

4 Present Moral Philosophers

The findings of the last section might seem not very impressive. After all, our “future selves” are strictly speaking not different people. Also, the epistemic superiority of our future selves that I have argued for is restricted to only one and perhaps some related moral questions. However, the epistemic superiority of our future selves with respect to some moral questions shows that it is possible that there are also genuinely different people who are our – or, more precisely, the average person’s – epistemic superiors in moral matters more generally. That is because there could be people who have as strong epistemic advantages over the average person with regard to moral matters generally as our future selves do over our present selves with regard to the moral question they have been prepared for. In what follows, I will argue that there are in fact people with such strong epistemic advantages, so that epistemic superiority in moral matters is not only a possibility but does actually exist.

There are different places to look for such epistemically advantaged people, but the most salient group of people are moral philosophers. Regarding moral matters, moral philosophers are epistemically advantaged over other people in many obvious respects. Singer (1982, 9–10) has summarized the advantages in four categories: Moral philosophers are better in understanding and evaluating the logical structure of relevant arguments; they have a clearer understanding of moral concepts; they have superior knowledge of moral theories and their implications; and they spend much more time thinking about moral matters. That last advantage of moral philosophers corresponds to the epistemic advantages of our future selves with regard to the moral question they have been prepared for. Both have additional time which they can use to acquire information, think about their moral relevance, consider analogous moral cases, and so on (see Singer 1972a, 116). In many cases moral philosophers even spend more time on a given moral question than others (can) decide to invest even if the question is of personal interest to them. The other three advantages – logical and conceptual understanding as well as knowledge about moral theories –, which moral philosophers have due to their academic training, do not have equivalents in case of the prepared future selves of the average person. These advantages allow moral philosophers to use their time spent on a moral question in an epistemically more effective way than others could. In fact, there seem to be more such advantages of moral philosophers such as their easier access to the relevant literature and their opportunity to discuss their thoughts with other moral philosophers who work on the same issues. In sum, both moral philosophers and prepared future selves spend much more time on

moral matters than others while moral philosophers have several significant further advantages which increase their epistemic productivity. Therefore, moral philosophers are generally at least as reliable in moral matters as the future selves of the average person are with regard to the moral question they have been prepared for. Since the latter are the average person's epistemic superiors, moral philosophers are the epistemic superiors of the average person too.

Here is a further, more direct argument for the conclusion that moral philosophers are moral experts: Instead of thinking about typical epistemic advantages of actual future selves and comparing them with the epistemic advantages of moral philosophers, we can imagine that an average person undergoes a hypothetical process in which she obtains the epistemic traits of moral philosophers, and ask whether the resulting hypothetical future self is her former epistemic superior. Since the hypothetical future self has exactly the epistemic traits of moral philosophers, moral philosophers are the average person's epistemic superiors if and only if the hypothetical future self is her former self's epistemic superior.

So let us create such a hypothetical future self by applying the hypothetical transition process to a person who thinks about some moral question, say, how much she ought to give to charity, and who is in an average epistemic position towards that question. In order to argue for the especially contentious claim that there is moral expertise that is not merely based on superior empirical knowledge, we can even imagine that the person is as empirically informed about the moral question at issue as moral philosophers. For example, she knows as much as moral philosophers about what charities there are, what kind of charitable work they are offering, how effective their measures are; and so on. However, she has reflected on the moral relevance of that empirical information no more than the average person. Now, let us add, step by step, the epistemic traits that are specific to moral philosophers to her epistemic situation. First, she is given much more time to think about the moral question. After she could only think about the moral question in the margins of her daily life, now she can spend some of her best hours of the week on this moral issue. In that time, she can conduct epistemic activities like the ones enumerated before: thinking of and weighing different moral considerations; considering the moral question from different perspectives; checking for biases; and so on. However, her epistemic gains per hour spent on the moral issue would decrease rather quickly. For instance, she will take longer and longer to come up with new important moral considerations. But then, another incredible thing happens to her: She obtains knowledge about and access to the texts written by others who had as much time as her to think about the moral issue, as well as the necessary epistemic skills to understand and evaluate their arguments. In case of the charity question, she would probably learn about Singer's (1972b) argument that an obligation to give

substantial amounts of money to charity can be derived from certain principles of sacrifice as well as about his analogy of a drowning child in a nearby pond; she would learn about various criticisms and revisions of these arguments (e.g. Kamm 1999 and Timmerman 2015); and perhaps she would learn about an argument that giving is less morally demanding than is usually thought (McAskill, Mogensen & Ord, 2018). There is still at least one important transition left: After she has thought about all of this for quite a while and starts to develop her own views on the moral issue, she has the opportunity to present her thoughts to others who have the same special epistemic traits with regard to moral matters as her. From them, she receives feedback, faces objections, gets new ideas and is prompted to revise her view until it bears scrutiny.

Has this hypothetical transition process made our former average person more or less reliable in the moral domain? Should we expect her to answer moral questions such as how much she ought to give to charity more or less accurately? I find it highly plausible that she became significantly more reliable in moral matters and that we should expect her to form more accurate beliefs about moral questions. The former average person could have easily formed a badly inaccurate belief by only relying on a certain perspective or moral consideration, being partial or simply not having thought things through. Her hypothetical future self seems to be much less likely to have made such epistemic mistakes. It would have to pass, first, her extended reflection, second, her competent examination of the literature and, third, the scrutiny by her peers. Each of these three changes should result in a significant increase of her reliability.⁵

5 Further Requirements for Moral Expertise

I have argued that moral philosophers are significantly more reliable in moral matters than the average person. That answers my question of *Epistemic Superiority in the Moral Domain*. But does that suffice to show that there are moral experts? As mentioned before, it has been argued that there are further conceptual requirements for moral expertise besides epistemic superiority in the moral domain. This controversial issue is also discussed with regard to expertise in

⁵ But couldn't there be biases that decrease the reliability of moral philosophers? There certainly could be and probably are since it is the exception when there are no biases involved. The interesting question would be whether there are any biases which are specific to moral philosophers and which are that strong that the additional reflection and discussion of moral issues by moral philosophers does not result in any significant epistemic progress despite their uncontroversial additional skills and knowledge. As with regard to other domains of expertise, although it is hard to rule out, it seems unlikely that there are biases of that joint specificity and strength. The most plausible candidate could be the confirmation bias; but while it might affect the individual reflection of moral philosophers more than the reflection of others, plausibly it is also more strongly counterbalanced by their following controversial discussion with other philosophers (see Mercier 2011).

general. In fact, there are categorically different proposals for defining expertise which include functional, veritistic, and justificational approaches (see Goldman 2018 for an overview).⁶ Here, I will only briefly discuss what I take to be the most plausible further requirement for expertise as applied to the moral domain.

Suppose that the average person is horribly biased about moral matters so that she judges moral questions much less reliably than chance. Now consider an individual who is also biased regarding moral matters, but not as badly as the average person, so that she reaches a reliability that is only slightly worse than chance. She would be much more reliable than the average person, but it is doubtful whether she would qualify as a moral expert. After all, she is less reliable than chance! Such cases motivate the addition of an absolute level of reliability, say 75%, that experts have to pass.⁷ While I am skeptical towards that specific suggestion, I think that the case at hand shows that there is a further reliability requirement that experts, including moral experts, have to fulfill.⁸

In whatever (plausible) way this further reliability requirement is explicated, there is a simple argument to the conclusion that the requirement is fulfilled by the epistemic superiors in the moral domain: With regard to moral matters, our epistemic situation is not as bad as in the pessimistic scenario sketched above; perhaps we make a lot of mistakes, but we do at least somewhat better than chance when answering moral questions. Moral issues are often more complicated than we initially think, but we are not helpless when we face them as most of us were, for example, if faced with questions of quantum physics. But if that moderate optimism is accurate so that the average person tends to form true rather than false beliefs about moral matters, someone who is significantly *more* reliable than the average person, such as moral philosophers, plausibly also has a sufficiently high reliability for expertise.

This is not a conclusive argument, but I think that it makes plausible that epistemic superiors in moral matter should be regarded as moral experts. Of course, the argument does not show (or even make plausible) that moral philosophers are as reliable as, e.g., engineers or doctors (see Singer 1982, 10). But that shouldn't make us think that there are no moral experts. Experts in different domains don't have to be equally or even similarly reliable; they just need

⁶ Accordingly, some would even disagree that epistemic superiority (as explicated in the main text) is a necessary condition for expertise.

⁷ McGrath (2008, 97) considers the possibility that moral expertise might require a high absolute level of reliability. See Goldman (2001, 91–92) and Goldman (2018, 4–5) for discussion about comparative and absolute veritistic requirements for expertise in general.

⁸ Another possible way to specify the additional requirement, that I think is preferable, is that experts need to be significantly more reliable than chance, where the “reliability of chance” can vary between domains due to different prior probabilities of propositions.

to reach a certain threshold of reliability that might be specific to their own domain. And whether that threshold is relative to domains or not, there is space above the threshold which allows for very different levels of reliability and, accordingly, different degrees of expertise. Thus, we could claim that moral philosophers possess expertise in the moral domain although not as much expertise as doctors and engineers possess in their respective domains. The same seems to be true for experts in many other domains such as economists and psychologists. Perhaps, moral philosophers sit well with the latter.

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