

Are moral philosophers moral experts?

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Abstract:

In this paper I examine the question of whether ethicists are moral experts. I call people moral experts if their moral judgments are correct with high probability and for the right reasons. I defend three theses, while developing a version of the coherence theory of moral justification based on the differences between moral and nonmoral experience:

The answer to the question of whether there are moral experts depends on the answer to the question of how to justify moral judgments. Deductivism and the coherence theory both provide some support for the opinion that moral experts exist in some way. I maintain – within the framework of a certain kind of coherence theory – that moral philosophers are ‘semi-experts’.

I Introduction

What status do the ethical judgments of moral philosophers have? What part do moral philosophers play in committees? Are their judgments superior to the moral judgments of other people? Are moral philosophers, who deal with ethical theory, *moral experts*, with privileged access to the truth? If not, why do we send them to ethics committees? If they are, do they play a special role in those committees? Are they more competent at moral judgments than the other participants?

An example: suppose the ethics council of the German minister of public health needs to advise on whether active euthanasia should be legalized. Ethicists in the council think ‘yes’, other participants think ‘no’. Should the doctors and lawyers of the council dispense with their moral judgments because the experts see it differently and thus reveal them to be mistaken?

I want to argue, in this article, for the thesis that we can only decide whether there are moral experts after answering the question of how moral judgments are justified. The answer to our question about moral expertise is not independent from theoretical ethics.

In this section I want to look at the debate about moral expertise.¹ Then I want to link this question with the problem of justification of moral judgments. There are two dominant theories of founding ethical judgments which I will analyse in this paper: the deductive and the coherence account. I maintain that both accounts imply an answer to our question about the possibility of moral experts. In the second section I will deal with an example of deductivism, R. Hare's moral theory. In the third section I will present the essentials of coherentism. This theory offers a further example of the dependence of moral expertise on the question of moral justification. In the last section of this article, I discuss some consequences of coherentism for the status of moral experts. I will defend the thesis that ethicists are 'semi-experts', following the coherence theory of justification.

The question of moral expertise is not widely discussed in the literature. To call ethicists 'moral experts' is a kind of revival for Plato's philosopher-kings, says A. Caplan.² And C.D. Broad writes:

'It is no part of the professional business of moral philosophers to tell people what they ought or ought not to do. Moral philosophers, as such, have no special information, not available to the general public, about what is right and what is wrong.'³

S. Kierkegaard dares the thesis: 'Everybody knows everything about matters of ethics'.⁴ But we may doubt this, if we see that there is no general consensus on the questions of abortion or euthanasia. Can there be a natural answer to these questions that everybody knows? For this reason, some philosophers acknowledge that philosophers and especially ethicists have special competences. This leads to at least a tension in B. Gert's position. He maintains that on the one hand: 'No one can legitimately claim to be a moral expert.' On the other hand, Gert holds that:

'Moral philosophers clarify the nature of morality and try to show that it is justified, but those who have better knowledge of the relevant facts and more experience in the relevant field are more likely to make better moral decisions in that field.'⁵

¹ A good overview is given by: Parker, L.S., (2005).

² Caplan, A., (1982), chapter 2.

³ Broad, C.D., (1952).

⁴ Kierkegaard, S., (1997), 23f.

⁵ Gert, B., (1998), 11.

A first step at clarification may be to look what certain *competences* we can ascribe to ethicists. They are familiar with ethical theory, the relevant facts and the factual moral codes in different societies. Furthermore, they have special faculties, and some normal faculties in an extraordinarily high dose. P. Singer lists these: 1) ethicists are familiar with moral arguments, 2) they can infer correctly, 3) they are familiar with moral concepts, 4) they are able to study moral problems more deeply and over more time than other people, 5) they have the ability to empathize with other people⁶ and as D. Birnbacher adds: 6) they have some self-awareness, which means they can discover and defeat their own prejudices.⁷ So ethicists are a kind of expert on ethics, because they have knowledge in certain areas, because they can justify their judgments well and because they have reached a certain level of education.⁸ I call this a *weak sense* of expertise. But are *experts in ethics* also experts in the *strong sense*, whose (moral) evaluations are better than those of the layperson? Are they *moral experts*? That I will discuss in the next sections. First I want to consider the meaning of the word ‘expert’. It cannot mean that only an expert can make correct judgments. We call people experts in the ‘*strong sense*’ if their judgments are correct with high probability and *for the right reasons*. They need not have a special quality of knowledge that the person on the street can never access. As our list above shows, the ethicist has no abilities that the person on the street cannot have in principle.⁹ Fallible judgments can still be expert judgments. Testing such a judgment independently is not redundant if there are doubts about whether it is right. So, experts can have a pragmatic function,¹⁰ but they are not infallible.

II Deductivism

I want to argue for the thesis that whether there are moral experts can only be decided once the question from theoretical ethics of how moral judgments are justified has been decided. Some people disagree. Their answers are governed by the consequences that might follow for practical matters. What problems might arise in committees if ethicists claim that they are moral experts? But philosophical problems are not solved by worrying about consequences.

⁶ Singer, P., (1972), 117. Frey attacks Singer maintaining that analytical skills do not lead to the normative judgments we expect from moral experts. But Frey does not realize that the correct use of moral concepts implies correct normative judgments in Hare’s ethics, which is adopted here by Singer. Frey, R.G. (1978), 48f.

⁷ Birnbacher, D., (2002), 100f.

⁸ Weinstein, B.D., (1994), 68.

⁹ That is emphasized by Lillehammer. Lillehammer writes about a ‘division of intellectual labour’ wherein ethicists play their part if they think about conceptual aspects of morality. That is not possible for the person on the street or for other scientists because they lack the time to do it. Lillehammer, H., (2004), 133.

¹⁰ This is not an ‘authority fallacy’. As demonstrated by: Walton, D., (1997), 257ff.

The issue is one of truth, not of convenience. The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that whether you can accept that there are moral experts depends on the method of justification you accept in theoretical ethics.

We will look here at two dominant methods of justification for ethical judgments: the deductive and the coherence account. I maintain that both accounts imply an answer to our question about the possibility of moral experts. I choose these accounts, because I think they are the ones used most often and because I want to make some new points concerning coherentism. But other metaethics will have other consequences. If you defend, for example, a relativist position that denies that there are truth and knowledge in the area of morals, then moral experts do not exist.

Let us look at deductivism first. Deductivism claims that there is an ethical theory that applies to the whole field of morals, and from which may be deduced an evaluation of each individual case. This theory is not governed by intuitions arising from single cases. A theory about the question of cloning need not agree with our intuitions about cloning. Intuitions, on this view, have no weight. Moral justification goes only in one direction, from theories to single cases – top down. Hare gives us a reason for this: We cannot use unjustified moral intuitions to answer the question of justification of moral judgments. This would be *a petitio principii*. We need to clarify the justification standards of intuitions before we can use them. To do otherwise would create a vicious circle.¹¹ But in that case, how can we justify the theory? Hare says we need only the meaning of moral concepts and the knowledge of empirical facts.

But the method of moral justification is not the way to decide moral conflicts. Intuitions and simple principles are considered to be on the first level of Hare's two-level theory of morality.¹² Hare distinguishes the 'intuitive level' (level 1) from the 'critical level' (level 2). Level 1 has the function to make concrete decisions and their bases are intuitions and everyday principles, which are often generalizations of them. Such principles are almost unspecified: 'Don't kill human beings'. The second level serves to justify the statements that are made on the first level. Principles on the second level can have a very high degree of specification because they are not means of actual decision making.

This account of justification has implications for the question of moral expertise. Hare must defend the following argument. (Other deductivists will also stress the importance of correct inferring – as a special domain of philosophers – while they may claim that moral theories are not justifiable by means that are accessible to every layman. So the defender of

¹¹ Hare R.M., (1981), I.3.

¹² Ibid.: 3.1-3.5.

moral intuitionism may claim something like an extra sense-organ for morality, which makes this deductive account much more elitist than Hare's deductivism.)

P1: Ethicists use moral concepts correctly and make correct inferences in most cases.

P2: To reach correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons, it is sufficient to use moral concepts correctly and to make correct inferences in most cases.

C1: So: Ethicists reach correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons.

P4: To be a moral expert means to reach correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons.

C2: So: Ethicists are moral experts.

Moral philosophers (= ethicists) are very competent with moral concepts and empirical facts (P1). Their competence consists in knowledge of moral theories and in skills such as inference, a feeling for language, and so on. This competence is a necessary and sufficient condition, according to Hare, for reaching correct moral judgments (P2). If we combine Hare's account of justification with a moderate concept of 'moral expertise' (P4), the question of moral expertise is already answered. If moral philosophers work well they will systematically make the right moral judgments, which the layman sometimes makes, sometimes fails to make. Moral philosophers are of course moral experts if the competence of a moral philosopher is sufficient for obtaining justified moral judgments. So P. Singer, who accepts Hare's metaethics here, argues in exactly this way for the existence of moral experts.¹³ This does not mean that the layman cannot make correct moral judgments. Logic and the meanings of moral concepts are not unavailable to the person on the street. But the ethicist will use them systematically and so will be *more likely* to reach correct judgments. We can conclude: the answer to the question of whether there are moral experts depends on the answer to the question of how to justify moral judgments. The problem cannot be solved by analyses of political consequences.

I do not want to discuss in this paper which model of justification is the right one. I will argue that each model has consequences for the question of whether there are moral experts. But I confess to being a supporter of coherentism,¹⁴ and therefore coherentism will be explained in more detail than deductivism. After this explanation, the consequences for our main question will be analysed. There is no standard version of coherentism. Most

¹³ Singer P., (1972).

¹⁴ Reasons for this may be found in: Gesang, B. (2000).

philosophers cite Rawls' metaphor of 'reflective equilibrium' as if that is the whole story.¹⁵ I will give my own version of coherentism and answer the questions about moral expertise in reference to it.

III The coherence theory

A coherence theory of moral justification is based on the idea that there are different sources of justification, which support and correct each other. The following four sources can be distinguished:

First, there are *ethical theories*.

Second, there are *moral feelings*, which arise spontaneously and uncontrolled with the perception of single cases and which lead to singular moral judgments. I call this '*moral experience*' because here we are passive recipients, as with non-moral experience.

Third, there are *common-sense theories*, a source of ordinary moral judgments, which contain generalizations of moral experience and simple principles like "if everyone were to do this...'. These are just the principles which Hare suggests be located on the first level of moral decision. Common-sense theories will mostly rationalize moral experience, and they are often inconsistent. Common-sense theories and ethical theories might overlap in some places. We call the second and the third instance together '*moral intuition*'.

Fourth, *non-moral knowledge* of facts and theories must be considered.

A justified moral judgment occurs when all four sources favour the same solution. If the judgment 'You shall not lie in situation s' is deducible from the best ethical theory and, if our moral intuitions agree and if the judgment is based on a right analyses of non-moral facts, than this judgment is very well justified. That is the core idea of coherence theories in moral philosophy.

This strategy of foundation is – like every coherence theory – open to criticism, especially of circularity. Intuitions influence theory and theory influences intuitions. But the defender of the coherence theory responds that not all circles are vicious. Of course, the theory being proved must not produce the intuition that corroborates it. The theory that is in question must not correct these intuitions; they must be controlled by a theoretical background knowledge that is not problematic in this context. Knowledge is 'holistic' in structure, according to the defender of the coherence theory. So we cannot begin 'ex nihilo'. We have to accept some judgments that we find intuitively convincing, and on those we may erect a coherent building. That we are able to do this and to build a coherent and explanatorily

¹⁵ Rawls, J., (1971).

convincing whole is itself justification for those intuitive foundations that we used at the beginning. Such a ‘foundation’ will never be immune to criticism but it is a starting point that – in the eyes of its defender – is much more plausible than starting from arbitrary decisions.

The coherence theory faces difficulties if the judgments that stem from the different sources described above do not agree, as is often the case. And this is different from the problem we face if we want to justify empirical judgments or empirical theories by a coherence theory. This difference lies in the specific structure of moral experience. In ethics there is no primacy of experience to bring about a hierarchy in the reflective equilibrium (and here my version of the coherence theory differs from, for example, realistic accounts of coherence).¹⁶ Even in the theory of empirical sciences given by holistic philosophers there are two components, concepts and experiences, that can be combined in different ways. General judgments can be formed with concepts and can be tested against experience. Of course, experience is influenced by theory, but theories of empirical science aim to agree with judgments formed by experience in normal cases. Experiences are the fallible test case of empirical theories. While we have a *relative* primacy of experience in the empirical sciences that even holistic philosophers like N. Rescher, W.v.O. Quine and L. Bonjour accept,¹⁷ in ethics we have no clear hierarchy between theory and experience.¹⁸

A reason for this can be found in the structure of moral experience. If we leave aside moral realism and its picture of moral experience – according to which we can observe moral facts and learn to correct false observations through training¹⁹ – then moral experience is much more subjective than nonmoral experience. Moral experience is influenced by the concrete subject, its preferences, traditions, and so on. That is different from empirical science.²⁰ We speak from a ‘*weakness of moral experience*’ because of this subjectivity. Because of this, moral experience loses its primacy over theories.

This loss becomes evident in the following phenomenon.

The empirical sciences aim to agree with experience in normal cases. ‘Anomalies’ can be accepted, according to some philosophers.²¹ But one thing rarely happens: a scientist argues that a certain experience is precisely observed according to all standards of observation, but that the judgment based on it is simply false because a certain theory contradicts it. There are theories of observation. If the best of these theories says that an observation judgment is false,

¹⁶ McNaughton, D., (1992, 1988).

¹⁷ Rescher, N., (1973), 219, Quine, W.v.O., (1960), §10, Bonjour, L., (1985), Kpt. 6,

¹⁸ Ebertz and Elgin want to establish a primacy of experience even in ethics: Ebertz, R., (1993), Elgin, C.H., (1996).

¹⁹ Vgl. McNaughton, D., (1992, 1988), 55-60.

²⁰ Cf. Harman, G., (1977), 3-10.

²¹ Lakatos, I., (1968).

this is accepted. A good example is colour-blindness. Suppose someone ‘observes’ that blood is not red. This judgment can be falsified by looking at the standard theory of observation. This means that observation judgments can be tested through theories that are specifically about genuine observation. But a defender of the ‘steady-state-theory’ in cosmology cannot maintain that the observation of background radiation is not right because it is inconsistent with the theory that there was no ‘hot phase’ of the universe. Only a theory of observation can falsify an observation-statement in such a direct way.

Our example does not show a normal case of the relationship between theory and experience. But in the special context of ethics it is a normal case. Some defenders of utilitarianism or contractualism think that many moral experiences are based on prejudices and are not right. Nonmoral experience, on the other hand, is only treated that way if we have reason to expect illusions, etc. But we accept most cases of non-moral experience as unproblematic. Moral experience is never unproblematic. Even standard cases like ‘Torture is an evil’ can be discussed critically, as the recent debates about ‘ticking bomb scenarios’ show. So moral experience is different in character from nonmoral experience and this supports the thesis stated above, that there is a so-called ‘weakness of moral experience’. This thesis is further supported by the fact that we may observe a moral problem very carefully and yet be unsure which observation-statement to formulate. Moral experiences can be *ambiguous* – even for an individual observer – so that the observer cannot describe them in a single way. He may experience *x* at the same time as being good and bad.²² So, sometimes the moral properties of a case cannot be determined even by close observation. Uncertainties like this are not possible in nonmoral experience.

There are even more special features of moral experience. The cases that produce moral experiences need not exist in *reality*. They only need to be *possible* in order to play a role in moral justification. *Thought experiments* are allowed in ethics and often have the same weight as real cases. Moral experiences arise even when only imagining cases. In physics there are also thought experiments of course, e.g. the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen-(EPR)-Experiment. These, however, are theoretical constructions that do not produce concrete experiences but only hypotheses about possible future observations. Moral experience may be produced by imagining cases, but the EPR-Experiment does not cause people to *feel* or *see* anything. That is an important difference. In empirical science, events must occur for one to observe them. In ethics it is enough to imagine a case in order to generate a moral experience from it.

²² Cf. Wong, D., (1992), 772f.

Furthermore, there is a difference between the two types of experience with respect to the *possibility of reproducing their results*. Moral experiences cannot be reproduced objectively in all similar situations because they depend partially on the moral values of the person who experiences them. So, moral experiences are often relative to different cultures, and they can even vary for one and the same observer at different times. Valid nonmoral experience, on the other hand, is reproducible in experiments.

So if we use moral experience for the justification of moral judgments and if we follow my account, there is a ‘dialectic’ relationship between theory and experience in ethics that has no determined hierarchy because of the ‘weakness of moral experience’. This point is summarized by Beauchamp and Childress:

‘Moral experience and moral theories are dialectically related: We develop theories to illuminate experience and to determine what we ought to do, but we also use experience to test, corroborate, and revise theories.’²³

Because of this, the defender of coherentism cannot provide a clear hierarchy in the reflective equilibrium. The hierarchy cannot be provided through abstract reflection but only from case to case within this framework of a coherence theory. So here the limits of the coherence theory become evident. An antirealistic coherentist can only say that, in general, a justification that unifies all levels of justification is the best justification within the framework of the coherence theory.

IV Ethicists as semi experts

What consequences does the coherence theory have for the question of moral expertise? Every kind of coherence theory confirms the belief that moral philosophers are moral experts. It supports the following argument:

P1: Only ethicists know moral theories and (like everyone) they have moral intuitions.

P2: Reaching correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons is only possible if you reach a complete reflective equilibrium.

P3: A complete reflective equilibrium can be reached only by someone who has knowledge about moral theories and who has moral intuitions.

²³ Beauchamp, T.L., Childress, J.F., (1989, 1979), 15.

C1: So, only ethicists can reach a complete reflective equilibrium and only ethicists reach correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons.

P4: To be a moral expert means to reach correct moral judgments with high probability and for the right reasons.

C2: So: Ethicists are moral experts.

Moral philosophers are familiar with ethical theory. They have moral intuitions – like every human being (P1). Justification within the so-called ‘reflective equilibrium’ can only be obtained when theories and intuitions correct or confirm each other. *But then knowledge of ethical theories is an essential part of reaching correct moral judgments.* Laypersons are not familiar with ethical theory and so are not familiar with the theoretical part of the reflective equilibrium (P3). Therefore the decisions of ordinary people can only be *dominated by intuitions* and that is a problem in the eyes of the coherence theory. Intuitions can change within the reflective equilibrium and such a change is impossible if one doesn’t run through the whole process. So, the whole process must be carried out (P2). Only ethicists can build a *complete* reflective equilibrium, so their judgments will be better founded and will be right with high probability, if the coherence theory is right (C1). Combined with a moderate concept of moral expertise (P4) we can conclude that ethicists are moral experts in some way, even within the framework of coherence theory (C2). It is not a trivial result that theory knowledge is decisive for expertise. Particularists think that an expert is the ‘phronimos’ who knows how to judge by experience. Like Aristotle they may have doubts that theory-knowledge is helpful in ethics. And many defenders of the existence of experts have argued in the tradition of Plato that a special competence called ‘intuition’ is necessary to be an expert. Here my result differs.

A possible objection to my argument goes as follows: ethicists are no experts concerning nonmoral facts. So they won’t be able to run through the whole equilibrium because knowledge of nonmoral facts is necessary to do so. But most morally relevant facts are not so complex that they cannot be known by scientifically educated ethicists. For example, to make judgments about the ethics of cloning you have to know the technique of nucleus transfer. But to know all the biochemical processes involved is unnecessary. The facts of moral relevance lie in sectors of science that are relatively easily accessible. There may be cases where ethicists are unable to judge because their empirical understanding is not great enough. Here they can give no expert judgment but this sort of case may be rare. So it seems to be true that, on the coherence theory, ethicists are moral experts.

But is this the whole story? Of course, moral judgments from moral philosophers will be better founded and more likely to be right than judgments from ordinary people. But moral philosophers cannot say to their students: ‘Your opinion is just false’ as physicists can. The sketched type of coherence theory shows that at least half of the justification process depends on subjective moral intuitions, which are ‘weak’ and so not intersubjectively reproducible. Therefore, moral philosophers are not experts who are able to demonstrate their knowledge to everybody. Recalling the sketch of coherentism above, moral knowledge depends in part on the personal intuitions of the moral philosopher, and that is decisively different to the case of the physicist. I claim, as a supporter of this kind of coherence theory, that moral philosophers are ‘semi-experts’. Semi-experts can reach correct moral judgments with higher probability than laypersons, *so far as there exists a consensus of fundamental moral intuitions*. But their judgments can be criticized by any ordinary person who has different intuitions. Moral philosophers cannot pronounce absolute wisdom, but on the other hand, there are good reasons to take their judgments very seriously and to have them serve on political committees. Relativizing ‘moral rightness’ cannot be avoided by this kind of coherence theory. If there are too many groups with very different intuitions this relativization becomes too great and we can no longer class ethicists as ‘experts’. This concept has a far reaching claim of generality.²⁴ But the need for relativization decreases if the ethicist can convince people through reflection that they share many intuitions, despite *prima facie* differences, and if he can convince them to change some of their initial intuitions. It is an important task of ethicists to try this. They try to convince the layperson: ‘If you knew all the facts and theories, you would think like me.’²⁵ But this leads to a general theory of moral rightness, which is not the task of this paper.

Furthermore, it is not the only task of ethicists, e.g. in committees, to provide expert judgments and so to advise on solutions. Because they are semi-experts, ethicists should not only promote their own normative judgments, but should also show the other participants of the discourse what consequences their own views have. Ethicists should provide others with a kind of land map.²⁶ With this map they can determine their own positions and the alternative ways to their aims. Here, ethicists can use all those capabilities that Birnbacher and Singer describe, as mentioned above. They become mediators. So they must fight for their own

²⁴ But we think that we can use this concept still. Even Weinstein speaks of moral expertise as an expertise for a ‘particular domain’. (Weinstein, B.D., (1994), 63) Other theories speak of “truth relative to a moral framework” but defend calling this ‘truth’, cf. Harman G., Thomson, J.J., (1996), 3ff.

²⁵ Engelhardt jr. thinks that ethicists are in danger of becoming ‘conceptive ideologists’ and try to suggest with concepts like ‘the right moral decision’ a consensus that does not really exist. Semi-experts with a relative idea of ‘rightness’ are surely not in this danger. Engelhardt jr., T., (2002), 81.

²⁶ Cutter speaks of bioethicists as ‘geographers of facts, values, and socio-political influences’, Cutter M.A.G., (2005), 133.

standpoints – that is their duty as experts. But this activity has its limits and they must show some restraint, because they do not have sole access to the truth – that is the duty of a semi-expert.

To complete the circle: What situation do we have concerning the question of the legalization of euthanasia? Doctors and lawyers on the committee mentioned above must not resign and think ‘We have made a mistake, alas.’ But they should ask the ethicists about their reasoning. The ethicists should try to convince the others from the reflective equilibrium that is the basis for their decision. But they should also explain alternatives and inform the other participants. This way the decision of the committee will be improved, even if only because the other members understand better why they are against the legalization of euthanasia.

In summary, here again are my three points:

- 1) The answer to the question of whether there are moral experts depends on the answer to the question of how to justify moral judgments.
- 2) Deductivism and the coherence theory both provide some support for the opinion that moral experts exist in some way.
- 3) I maintain – within the framework of a certain kind of coherence theory – that moral philosophers are ‘semi-experts’.

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