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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Moral testimony and epistemic privilege

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Abstract

How should we, as philosophers, respond to the pure moral testimony of people in marginalized positions? Some philosophers argue that marginalized people have an epistemic advantage concerning their experiences of marginalization, such that, if we are non-marginalized, then we should defer to their moral testimony concerning these experiences. We might accept this as a requirement for ordinary conversation but doubt that any such requirement obtains when we do philosophy, since philosophy requires a critical stance. This paper argues that philosophers should also defer in such cases. It concludes that non-marginalized philosophers can only properly address certain moral propositions concerning the experiences of marginalized people if they engage in ongoing philosophical discussions with such people, starting from a position of trust.

KEYWORDS

epistemic deference, epistemic privilege, moral deliberation, moral epistemology, moral testimony, philosophical methods, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the northern summer of 2022, a colleague and I delivered a ten-week philosophy course in a category B men's prison in South East England.[1] Towards the end of this course, after we had got to know the men a little, they would sometimes tell us a bit about their lives inside the prison. During one such conversation, a man (whom I will call Nick) ruefully observed that he had not been offered any boiled eggs throughout his several years of imprisonment. He told me

[1]The course was funded by the Royal Institute of Philosophy and designed and delivered on behalf of the charity Philosophy in Prison (www.philosophyinprison.com).

that it was a real injustice that he and his fellow prisoners had been deprived of boiled eggs for so long.[2] I believed him.

Mine was, I take it, a straightforward case of belief in "pure moral testimony," as Alison Hills uses the term: in believing Nick, I believed a "piece of moral testimony that … [was] not supported by reasons" (Hills 2013, 552). In Sarah McGrath's terms, I "deferred" to Nick's testimony (2019, 69). Several philosophers, however, see something peculiar about the notion of forming beliefs via pure moral testimony.[3] They think that although it is often fine to form *non*-moral beliefs on the basis of testimony, there is something more troubling about mature moral agents basing their moral beliefs on testimony.[4]

Recently, however, several philosophers have offered compelling arguments to suggest that even if this is true, we *should* defer to certain kinds of moral testimony. We should, they argue, typically defer to the moral testimony of people who are marginalized, discriminated against, or oppressed (henceforth, "marginalized"), whenever their testimony concerns their experiences of being marginalized.

David Borman provides one such argument. He argues that each of us is best placed to understand our own experiences and interests, so that we should accept "first-personal" moral testimony from people whose experiences differ from our own (Borman 2020, 164).[5] By "first-personal" moral testimony, Borman means moral testimony delivered via assertions that can be "naturally rendered first-personally … [such as] 'that's demeaning to me' or 'to us'" (164). He argues that since we can often only acquire moral knowledge by deferring to such testimony, we should therefore come to think of "moral deliberation … as a social enterprise and not a philosophical exercise or thought-experiment" (178).

Savannah Pearlman and Elizabeth Williams offer a similar argument. They argue that we have a defeasible or "prima facie obligation to epistemically defer in cases in which the testifier is a member of a marginalized group that we ourselves are not and they testify about their marginalized experience" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 12). This, they argue, is because "members of marginalized groups have greater … expertise regarding claims about their experiences qua member of that marginalized group than nonmembers" (10).[6]

Although Pearlman and Williams do not stress this point, their argument lends support to a central strand of feminist standpoint epistemology. It supports the Epistemic Privilege thesis, described by Briana Toole as the "view according to which some epistemic advantage can be drawn from positions of powerlessness or marginalization" (Toole 2021, 342).[7] To be precise, I think we should read Pearlman and Williams as endorsing what I will call the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis: the view according to which some *moral* epistemic advantage can be drawn from positions of powerlessness or marginalization.

Certainly, during my brief informal conversation with Nick, it seemed clearly appropriate for me to defer to his moral testimony, given the important differences in our experiences. Fortunately for me, I lack his expertise regarding the experience of being systematically deprived of foodstuffs while serving a long prison sentence. Therefore, the above arguments suggest, I ought (ceteris paribus) to defer to Nick's testimony, and to accept that the deprivation

[2]Unfortunately, I made no record of this conversation, so I cannot precisely remember Nick's phrasing. I hope and believe, however, that my gloss on it accurately represents his meaning.

[3]E.g., Cholbi 2007; Driver 2006; Howell 2014; Lee, Sinclair, and Robson 2020; Nickel 2001; Williams 1995.

[4]Others disagree. E.g., Groll and Decker 2014; McShane 2018; Sliwa 2012.

[5]Borman frames his argument primarily with reference to its significance for theories of "hypothetical contractualism": those "contractualist moral theories that describe moral deliberation and the constitution of legitimate moral norms as a matter of hypothetical and monological self-reflection" (Borman 2020, 164). As a non-contractualist, I will ignore this aspect of his argument.

[6]They also argue that we have moral and interpersonal reasons to defer in such cases. I agree but will not pursue this argument here.

[7]The other two theses involved in standpoint epistemology, which I do not discuss here, are the Situated Knowledge thesis and the Achievement thesis (Toole 2021).

of a simple, widely available food can constitute more of an injustice than I would otherwise have suspected.

But what if one were to consider Nick's testimony as a *philosopher*, rather than simply as an interested conversationalist? If we want to truly understand the morality of food allocation in prison, then Nick's knowledge of prison life might seem significantly less helpful than the philosopher's theoretical knowledge or reasoning skills. Furthermore, we might think that a philosopher ought *generally* to resist deferring to testimony, and adopt instead a critical stance, taking nothing on trust.

In this paper, I argue against this way of thinking. In so doing, I argue, against Hills and others, that we should often defer to the pure moral testimony of others, and that we should not be too worried about this. I argue, against Borman, in favour of the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis. I also argue, against Pearlman and Williams, that we cannot expect people to be generally able to offer reasons for their moral judgements. My main target, however, is none of these philosophical views as such. It is instead an assumption embedded within our current philosophical practice: the assumption that we can do good normative moral or political philosophy *without* long-term philosophical engagement with people in marginalized positions.

Of course, there may be many reasons why we ought to prioritize such engagement. To give just one example, Michael Ray argues that people in prisons are often "forced, both by coercion and by lack of alternatives, to consume and use the dominant hermeneutical resources"—resources that serve those in charge rather than the prisoners themselves (Ray 2022, 343). Writing from within prison, Ray endorses Paulo Freire's thesis that theorists "have a responsibility not only to attend to the experience of oppressed and marginalized people but also to partner with the oppressed to learn how to interpret and theorize their own experience and the world outside of that experience" (Ray 2022, 337). If philosophers engage with prisoners *without* so partnering with them, Ray argues, then this will perpetuate an epistemic injustice.

In this paper, I take a different but complementary approach. I argue that non-marginalized philosophers are very unlikely to acquire certain important kinds of *moral* knowledge or understanding unless they start by deferring to the moral testimony of marginalized people. This is not to say that we, as philosophers, should abandon our critical stance. Rather, we should start from a position of trust, and then seek to critically evaluate our beliefs, values, and intuitions together with non-philosophers, as a joint enterprise.

2 | MORAL TESTIMONY AND MORAL UNDERSTANDING

As we have seen, several philosophers find something suspect in pure moral testimony. Robert Hopkins calls these philosophers "pessimists" and their rivals "optimists" (Hopkins 2007, 613). Optimists see no principled difference between our forming beliefs based on moral testimony and our forming beliefs based on non-moral testimony (Groll and Decker 2014; McShane 2018; Sliwa 2012). Pessimists argue that although it is often fine to form non-moral beliefs on the basis of testimony, there is something troubling about mature moral agents basing their moral beliefs on testimony.

Pessimists can press either epistemic or moral worries. Epistemic worries often focus on the problem of identifying genuine moral experts: those persons whose moral testimony might potentially lead to knowledge. Some epistemic pessimists argue that it would be difficult or impossible for *anyone* to be a moral expert (Driver 2006; Williams 1995, 205). Others argue that even if there are moral experts, it would be extremely difficult for anyone who lacked the relevant kind of moral knowledge to distinguish the experts from the non-experts (Cholbi 2007; McGrath 2019, 99–103).

Those pessimists who press moral worries might allow that we *can* gain moral knowledge via moral testimony, but they are troubled by this prospect. Some moral pessimists worry that it

would be bad for one's moral character to defer to the moral testimony of others.[8] A related worry is that we cannot acquire moral *understanding* via moral testimony, even if we might be able to acquire moral knowledge. Hills (2009) argues that this is a significant problem, because our actions can only be morally worthy if we are motivated to perform them for the right reasons, and because we can only be so motivated if we possess moral understanding.[9] We might add to this, given our present concern, that *philosophers* should try to understand that which they know.

According to Hills, moral understanding is like moral knowledge in being factive (one can only understand that which really obtains) but (probably) unlike moral knowledge in being non-propositional (Hills 2009, 99–106). She argues that moral understanding is grounded in a set of abilities, such that (where p is a moral proposition and q is the reason why p) one can:

(i) follow an explanation of why p given by someone else;
(ii) explain why p in your own words;
(iii) draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q;
(iv) draw the conclusion that p' (or that probably p') from the information that q' (where p' and q' are similar to but not identical to p and q);
(v) given the information that p, give the right explanation, q;
(vi) given the information that p', give the right explanation, q'. (Hills 2009, 102–3)

It is only if one can do these things that one can fully understand p. Here, I will accept this account of moral understanding (but see Sliwa 2012). I will also agree that, other things being equal, it is better to act in accordance with one's moral understanding, rather than just one's moral knowledge. But, as Hills allows, this is consistent with the view that it is better to have moral knowledge *without* understanding than to lack both. And there certainly appear to be cases where these are the only two available options.

A well-known, fictitious example comes from Karen Jones, who describes a man, Peter, who is told by his female flatmates that the three men with whom they all live are sexist and racist, so that the men should be removed from the house. Jones describes Peter as follows: "Peter had a settled and serious commitment to the elimination of racism and sexism, but he was not very good at picking out instances of sexism and racism. … He could pick out egregious cases of sexism and racism, and could sometimes see that 'sexist' or 'racist' applied to more subtle instances when the reason for their application was explained to him, but he seemed bad at working out how to go on to apply the words to non-egregious new cases" (Jones 1999, 59–60).

Assuming that Peter's flatmates appear to have been careful in their judgement, and that Peter has good reason to think them better judges than he is, it is surely right for him to defer to their judgement. Indeed, if someone in this kind of position were to *refuse* to accept the testimony given to them, we might well think that they were being unjust, disrespectful, or self-centred (Wiland 2017). Moreover, Peter ought to *act* on his newly formed belief in the racism and sexism of the three men, by joining in his flatmates' demands that they leave the house. In short, it seems right that Peter believes his flatmates' testimony, and right that he acts on this belief, despite his lack of moral understanding.

At this point, we might note several interesting things about Peter. First, he will presumably be *better* placed to (eventually) understand why his former flatmates were racist and sexist if he accepts this fact than if he were to refuse to believe it. Second, his female flatmates are clearly better than him at moral judgement, at least in cases concerning sexism. Such discrepancies certainly appear to occur in the real world, and we might well ask why.

[8]E.g., Howell (2014). Lee, Sinclair, and Robson (2020) argue that even if it is impermissible to form moral beliefs on the basis of testimony, it at least seems permissible to revise moral beliefs when treating moral testimony as higher-order evidence.
[9]McGrath (2019, 92–96) and Nickel (2001) argue for similar conclusions.

Borman suggests one answer, as follows. People are especially well placed to form accurate moral beliefs when they are personally affected by the moral considerations in question, because everyone is epistemically "privileged" when it comes to making "assessments of their own interests" (Borman 2020, 168). To illustrate this, Borman gives several examples of members of certain groups who are epistemically privileged when it comes to moral questions that affect that group. For example, Native Americans are epistemically privileged in deciding whether sports teams' names like the Washington Redskins are offensive (168–69); elderly people are epistemically privileged in deciding whether it is significantly worse for a young person to die than for an elderly person to die (172–73); women who wear headscarves or veils are epistemically privileged in deciding whether it is emancipatory or oppressive to ban headscarves or veils in public (176); people with Down syndrome and their families are epistemically privileged in determining the value or disvalue, if any, of living with Down syndrome (176).[10]

Furthermore, Borman argues, it is precisely *because* these people are epistemically privileged concerning certain moral questions that we ought to defer to them in (at least some) discussions of those questions. Ultimately, then, the reason we ought to defer to the various people listed above is because they are positioned such that they are personally affected by the topics under discussion.

Borman's argument may therefore appear to support the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis. Borman anticipates and rejects this kind of suggestion, however (Borman 2020, 176). He endorses Jones's denial of any "notion of epistemic privilege of the kind defended by standpoint theorists" (Jones 1999, 66): "It is enough if, through social location or choice, individuals come to have richer experiences with certain types of moral problems. We need not follow standpoint theorists and suppose in addition that the marginalized are always, or even generally, in the best position to understand the truth about social relations" (Jones 1999, 66).

In Borman's view, it seems, the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis misleads in two ways. First, it overstates the extent to which anyone gains any moral epistemic advantage from positions of marginalization. Second, it underemphasizes the extent to which non-marginalized people acquire epistemic advantages from *their* social positions. According to Borman, we should defer to *anyone* whose experience differs from ours: "[O]ur dependence upon the first-personal moral testimony of others … is enormously and indeed *indefinitely* widespread, inescapable in practice, and enduring" (Borman 2020, 176–77). We properly ought to include *everyone* who is actually or potentially affected by the actions or policies under deliberation, because every such person has an equal but different epistemic advantage.

If this is correct, then Borman's call to broaden and diversify moral deliberation, while welcome, can offer little help in deciding whom to prioritize in our discussions. I do not think, however, that the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis is misleading in either of the ways that Borman suggests. Indeed, we might note that the kind of social positioning that makes someone epistemically privileged, in *all* the kinds of cases that he describes, seems to be precisely that kind of positioning such that one is marginalized, discriminated against, or oppressed—whether by sexism, racism, ablism, ageism, or otherwise. This would seem difficult to account for if the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis were false. In the next section, I argue that the thesis is true.

3 | MORAL EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE

Let's return to my learning from Nick's moral testimony about prison life. How should we understand this? We might think it a case of what Hills calls "propagation": that kind of

[10]Borman frames this in terms of the permissibility of abortions in cases where there is a positive screening of Down syndrome. I have changed this framing because there are moral questions concerning the permissibility of abortion that are clearly distinct from those concerning Down syndrome.

learning by which "the speaker's knowledge that p, expressed through her testimony, is a causal factor and an epistemic influence on the learner's gaining knowledge that p, but not an epistemic ground of it" (Hills 2020, 401). Perhaps Nick's testimony simply caused me to engage in some moral reasoning of my own, such that I came to form the belief that there is significant injustice in depriving prisoners of boiled eggs. Indeed, so far as I am aware, I had never previously considered the injustice or otherwise of depriving prisoners of specific foods. Perhaps, then, Nick's testimony prompted me to reflect on the matter, and so to reach the (to me, surprising) conclusion that there is a significant injustice in depriving prisoners of boiled eggs.

There may well be something in this suggestion: I certainly have tried to reason about Nick's situation since hearing his testimony. I do not think, however, that this can be the whole story, not least because I am aware that I still do not fully understand the injustice in question. Despite believing that it *is* an injustice, I cannot fully explain *why* it is an injustice. I doubt that the prison staff were motivated by any malice or intent to cause unhappiness. I suspect that there were perfectly sensible reasons behind their never serving boiled eggs: perhaps they are hard to cook on a large scale and under safe conditions in a prison kitchen, for example. Nevertheless, boiled eggs are widely available and inexpensive, and I think that prison authorities ought to recognize that many people might want one every now and then.

Moreover, I can imagine that, given the many disempowering and deeply unpleasant experiences to which prisoners in the United Kingdom are routinely subjected, it would feel humiliating and demoralizing to observe that one cannot even get a boiled egg. Yet I initially underestimated, and still cannot be sure about, the extent to which this is humiliating and demoralizing in the context of serving a long sentence in prison.

I do not, therefore, think this was a case of propagation. Instead, it was what Hills calls "transmission": I took Nick at his word, and believed what he said because he said it (Hills 2020, 401). Furthermore, Pearlman and Williams suggest a very good reason why I was *right* to do so, despite my lack of moral understanding. They express this as follows: "Since certain phenomenological experiences of being a member of a marginalized group are not accessible to the receiver, the receiver cannot have a full and complete understanding of the moral reasons that support the testimony" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 16). Here, "receiver" means the non-marginalized person receiving the testimony of a member of a marginalized group. If this person cannot easily acquire moral understanding, then they ought at least to accept the testimony given to them and so acquire moral knowledge.

To apply this thought to my own case, I was—and I remain—entirely unable to imagine what it is *like* to be casually deprived of a common, widely accessible food for many of my adult years. It is, fortunately, not the kind of thing that I have ever had to experience. Therefore, it seems very unlikely that I *would* have come to know that there is a significant injustice in depriving prisoners of boiled eggs, even if I had been prompted to think about it, unless I was told of the injustice by someone who knows about it. Furthermore, I remain unable to understand exactly what the injustice consists in or how severe an injustice it is. With reference to Hill's conception of moral understanding, I cannot explain the injustice in my own words, I doubt that I could reliably draw conclusions about such injustices from relevant information, and so on.

We can now give some detail to the suggestion that members of marginalized groups have morally relevant expertise concerning their experiences that non-members lack. Any marginalized group is, in Pearlman and Williams's terms, a "social group that is subject to a combination of interpersonal, institutional, and structural oppression" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 3). To be situated in such a group is, inter alia, to be subject to a variety of related harms and injustices over time.[11] While it is typically easy for an outsider to identify

[11]For a detailed discussion, see Young 2011, chap. 2.

that someone *is* a member of a marginalized group, it may well be hard for them to understand all the harms and injustices to which that group is subject. It will certainly be difficult for them to fully understand how these harms and injustices might interact with or exacerbate one another.

My experience of Nick's testimony made salient to me one way in which this difficulty can manifest itself. Those of us who are not marginalized in a certain way are almost entirely unable to imagine what it is *like* to experience the effects of what would be, to us, trivial actions, when one experiences them from the relevant position of marginalization. Without this knowledge, we are unable to easily see whether or not—or in what ways, or to what extent—those actions might perpetuate or aggravate the relevant kind of marginalization. We are therefore poorly positioned to determine how or why the actions in question might be unjust or otherwise morally wrong.

This is, I suggest, what primarily explains the various epistemic privileges noticed by Borman. Consider cases concerning people with Down syndrome. Borman notes the evidence that people who neither have Down syndrome nor know anyone with Down syndrome typically underestimate how positive the lives of people with Down syndrome and their loved ones can be (Borman 2020, 176 n. 15). Unless you have Down syndrome or love someone who does, it seems very unlikely that you could know what it is like to routinely hear these kinds of inaccurate opinions expressed by people who clearly possess no relevant knowledge or understanding of the syndrome. And it is surely central to the injustice of treating the lives of people with Down syndrome in this way that it has a negative impact on such people and their loved ones.

I am therefore in complete agreement with Borman that people with personal experience of Down syndrome will be better placed than others to understand the moral implications of publicly underestimating the value of a life lived with Down syndrome. I think, however, that Borman significantly underestimates the role that being marginalized plays in their coming to understand this. One very important reason people who live with Down syndrome can understand the harms and injustices involved is because they know from experience the various *other* harms and injustices that people with Down syndrome face on a regular basis, *and* how these interact with and exacerbate one another. Without the experience of being socially situated in this way, it would be very difficult to fully understand these things. And this entails one acquiring a moral epistemic advantage by being socially positioned in this way.

In contrast, consider a case in which a group of men complain that they are being unjustly discriminated against because women are taking their jobs, but where the women in question disagree that this is unjust.[12] Perhaps, as Borman might stress, only men can fully understand what it is like to lose out to women when they are unaccustomed to doing so. Equally, however, only women can fully understand what it is like to attain such positions under these conditions, after many other women were denied them for unjust reasons. Moreover, men as a group are not marginalized, and so these men's experiences are very unlikely to occur in the context of a range of broader, related harms and injustices. Indeed, it may be that a significant reason for their distress is that they are relatively unused to losing out to members of social groups beyond their own. If we want to fully understand the moral implications of this social change, then one thing we must do is to consider how it interacts with any (other) injustices faced by the social groups in question. The foregoing suggests that women—as the more marginalized of the two groups—will be significantly better placed than men to understand this. Therefore, and in the context of everything else we know about the history of employment in historically patriarchal societies, we should trust the testimony of the women over that of the men.

[12]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this case and for pressing me to explain how it differs from the kinds of cases I focus on.

In cases like this, to employ Alison Wylie's terms, marginalized people gain an "epistemic advantage … from the kinds of experience they are likely to have, situated as they are, and the resources available to them for understanding this experience" (Wylie 2012, 47). Of course, this is not to say that non-marginalized people *cannot* gain moral knowledge about issues that affect marginalized people. Neither is it to say that marginalized people *necessarily* possess moral knowledge about such issues. It is merely to observe that marginalized people are significantly better positioned to gain relevant moral knowledge—and, indeed, moral understanding—about cases that affect them than any non-marginalized people would be. But to say this is enough to endorse the Moral Epistemic Privilege thesis.

Therefore, as Pearlman and Williams argue, we have a defeasible duty to defer to the moral testimony of any members of a marginalized group, at least as it draws on the testifier's experience of being marginalized. Of course, this *is* a defeasible duty. To give just one example, we should not defer if we have good reasons to think that a testifier is acting from malice or prejudice. The case of Peter and his flatmates would be very different, for example, if Peter's flatmates were to repeatedly accuse just non-white men of sexism or sexual harassment.[13] In this case, Peter should recognize that, although his flatmates are better positioned than he is to recognize sexism and sexual harassment, there is a prevalent racist stereotype of non-white men as sexually predatory that he ought not to ignore here. This is not to say that Peter should simply disbelieve his flatmates. How he ought to respond will depend on the details of the case: perhaps he should initially suspend belief and engage in further investigation, for example.

Such cases undoubtedly complicate matters. Nevertheless, as Borman's examples suggest, history is replete with cases where marginalized people have long known about various injustices that affect them, and where non-marginalized people have only come to recognize these injustices after listening to their moral testimony. Of course, there are some clearly egregious cases, like chattel slavery and the denial of driving licences to women: cases where marginalized and non-marginalized people alike can easily understand much of the injustice involved. But there are many other cases too: those where injustices, from microaggressions to more severe transgressions, have built up over time, as it were, to produce or significantly worsen various forms of marginalization. In such cases, marginalized people have known, as others have not, what it is *like* to experience the relevant kind of marginalization, and this has been central to their coming to know what the relevant injustices are. In such cases, "the experience of exclusion or marginalization … [is] itself … a … source of insight" (Wylie 2012, 63). Those of us who are not relevantly marginalized, and so lack this kind of insight, are *very* unlikely to autonomously arrive at accurate moral judgements about the injustices involved.

4 | MORAL EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE AND PHILOSOPHY

I think we must agree with Pearlman and Williams that those of us who are not relevantly marginalized ought, ceteris paribus, to defer to marginalized people's moral testimony about their marginalized experience. But while this may apply to us in our everyday lives—indeed, I suspect it is an obligation many of us at least implicitly accept—it is unclear that it applies to us in our capacity as philosophers.

In fact, Pearlman and Williams's argument might suggest a reason to think that we, as philosophers, should *not* defer to the moral testimony of marginalized people. First, they note that, when we receive moral testimony of the relevant kind, we can gain "a good bit of moral

[13]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

information about the testimony by virtue of recognizing that the person giving the testimony is a member of a marginalized group and that it is salient to their experiences as a member of that marginalized group" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 16). Consider Borman's example of hearing from several Native Americans that Redskins is an offensive name for a sports team. On hearing this, we have enough information to infer that the name is racist, even if we might not fully understand why. And, as Pearlman and Williams point out, it is "unclear what further explanation beyond 'x is wrong because x is racist' might be needed in order to justifiably hold the belief that x is wrong" (16).

This is all well and good in the context of everyday conversation. Philosophers, however, want to do more than justifiably hold moral beliefs. We also want to understand why they are justified, how the wrongness in question relates to other wrongs, and so on. This brings us to another of Pearlman and Williams's claims: that "marginalized people can, generally speaking, provide reasons in support of their testimony" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 18). If so, then their reasons can presumably help us acquire moral understanding.

Pearlman and Williams argue that it would often be wrong for us to ask for such reasons instead of deferring, since we ought to recognize that marginalized people will often lack the time or inclination to explain their views in detail. To insist on reasons would be to unfairly treat people as spokespersons for their groups, and it would be to engage in "epistemic exploitation" (Pearlman and Williams 2022, 18).

Nevertheless, we might think that we, as philosophers, *should* concern ourselves with people's reasons for judging as they do. Perhaps, then, *we* should not defer to moral testimony but instead seek out non-exploitative ways of asking a range of marginalized people to explain their moral judgements and their reasons behind these judgements in as much detail as possible. We can then treat these judgements and reasons as we would any others, by interrogating them for potential flaws, weighing them against conflicting arguments, and so on. Perhaps, that is, we should treat people's moral judgements and reasons as data for our *own* philosophizing.

Kristie Dotson (2011) offers one good reason to doubt that this would be our best approach. As she observes, philosophers typically begin investigations by drawing on arguments, theories, or framings that are familiar to us from the history of philosophy. And, she argues, this "effectively marginalizes problems and/or concerns of diverse people that do not fit comfortably within an already set disciplinary agenda" (Dotson 2011, 407). To be clear, I think we often have good reasons to draw on the history of philosophy, but Dotson's concern is an important one. There is no guarantee that the canonical history of philosophy contains the arguments, theories, or ways of thinking about ethics or politics that can be most usefully applied to the experiences of marginalized people. If philosophers are starting from unhelpful standpoints, they will be poorly placed to understand the injustices that marginalized people face. This alone should be enough to make us wary of engaging in philosophy about such injustices without including marginalized people in our discussions.

I think there is a further reason not to take the above approach. If I reflect on my conversation with Nick, I doubt that he *could* have explained all the relevant non-moral facts or his reasons for judging as he did. More generally, I disagree with Pearlman and Williams's claim that marginalized people can typically provide reasons in support of their moral testimony. I have suggested, with reference to their argument, that a central part of what makes many unjust actions unjust is that the actions or their consequences produce negative feelings in marginalized people. Marginalized people are, I have suggested, epistemically privileged about the moral disvalue of such actions because they, and they alone, experience precisely these feelings. And, I take it, we are rarely able to offer detailed or accurate explanations of how we feel or why we feel as we do. Very often, we can just *feel* that something is wrong, without being able to immediately articulate why. It is often only after considerable reflection and discussion that we can make sense of the moral implications of our experiences or even recognize which experiences are the most morally salient. Why might this be?

For one thing, as Miranda Fricker has argued, "relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources" such that marginalized people often lack both the ability to shape social meanings and the hermeneutical resources needed to make sense of their situation (Fricker 2007, 148). Fricker's example of this kind of hermeneutical gap concerns the general inability of women to make sense of sexual harassment before they came to conceive of it *as* sexual harassment. Her primary interest is in the injustice involved in such hermeneutical harms. Just as important, however, is the likely prevalence of such hermeneutical gaps across society.

As Fricker observes, we can easily "forget quite how astonishing and life-changing" it can be to realize hermeneutical resources that were previously only implicit, at best (Fricker 2007, 148). Prior to the development of the term "sexual harassment," there was simply no widespread recognition that there *was* a hermeneutical gap. Yet, Fricker reminds us, the gap was there, and it was deeply problematic. It prevented women from, among other things, fully understanding the wrongs done to them or arguing that such wrongs exist. Importantly, this hermeneutical gap was filled not by philosophers in the ordinary course of their business but by careful deliberation among women from various walks of life, whose testimony that *something* was wrong was trusted from the start.

Consider, once again, Borman's various examples of moral epistemic privilege. For each example, it seems likely that the people in question either lack the hermeneutical resources to fully make sense of the injustices they face or that they have acquired the relevant hermeneutical resources from a source other than academic philosophy. Such hermeneutical resources have primarily come from people *within* the marginalized communities in question, who wanted to understand and resist ageism, racism, sexism, ableism, and so on. It is vanishingly rare that professional philosophers successfully understood or analysed the injustices involved until after the most important thinking was done within the relevant communities themselves.

I think this is unsurprising, given that professional philosophers have rarely come from marginalized backgrounds. It is simply unlikely that many will have felt as marginalized people have felt, and so is unlikely that they will have been well placed to develop the hermeneutical resources required to make sense of these experiences, or even to see that such resources are needed.

Furthermore, recent psychological evidence suggests that many moral judgements are *intuitions*: affectively charged mental states, produced via automatic, fast, and non-conscious psychological processes. Across many psychological studies, Jonathan Haidt and others have presented respondents with scenarios concerning various peculiar, "offensive yet harmless" actions (Haidt 2001, 817). Most people immediately judged the actions to be wrong but then could not explain why. In many cases, Haidt reports, they were "morally dumbfounded": they would "stutter, laugh, and express surprise at their inability to find supporting reasons, yet they would not change their initial judgments of condemnation" (817). He concludes from this that many or all moral judgements are affectively charged intuitions.

Even if Haidt overstates the extent to which our moral judgements are intuitions, the kinds that are made in the face of hermeneutical gaps—the kinds in which we can *feel* that something is wrong before we can articulate why—certainly appear to be moral intuitions. Moreover, people typically cannot offer accurate or detailed reasons in support of their moral intuitions. This is not to say that they *lack* good reasons for these moral judgements (e.g., Horgan and Timmons 2007). It is only to say that people are often unable to fully articulate their reasons for morally judging as they do, at least without significant thought and discussion after the event. I think this applies to all of us, much of the time. So marginalized people will frequently be—as we all are—unable to easily explain or justify their moral judgements concerning the injustices that they face. Furthermore, it seems highly unlikely that anyone who is not so marginalized, as most philosophers are not, would experience any similar moral intuitions.

Of course, Haidt's findings remain controversial. Nevertheless, I think that this provides a very plausible explanation of the fact that professional philosophers have historically had a poor track record of understanding injustices to groups beyond their own, until they have trusted members of these groups enough to accept both that such injustices exist and that they are worthy of philosophical consideration. But if I am wrong, then the track record speaks for itself. It was disabled people, not philosophers, who recognized the wrongs in institutional care, developed inclusive language around disability, and argued that we are morally required to collectively support disabled people within society. Generally, it has largely been marginalized people, not philosophers, who have drawn our collective attention to bigoted or prejudiced behaviours and have developed the hermeneutical resources needed to challenge these. How, then, can philosophers hope to do better in future?

Clearly, for one thing, we should employ philosophers from far more diverse backgrounds, and with more diverse interests, than is currently the case (Cassam 2023; Dotson 2011). Even if we were to radically improve the diversity of professional philosophy, however, there will remain many people whose experiences are unrepresented. Consider people with learning disabilities, for example, or those who reach adulthood without being taught to read. These people will almost certainly have had many morally relevant experiences that are not had by any professional philosophers. And, of course, professional philosophy is far from diverse at present. Therefore, we should ask how we professional philosophers, as a relatively non-marginalized community, should engage in theorizing about moral and political questions that concern marginalized people.

The answer, I suggest, is that we should prioritize long-term, collaborative, philosophical programmes in which we deliberate with marginalized people. We should begin by recognizing that they may be aware of injustices of which we have no cognizance, and which may initially seem implausible or insignificant from our perspectives. We should, as a starting point, trust that such injustices exist, and then work together with marginalized people to attempt to understand them. Perhaps, in some cases, we will discover that our trust is misplaced, and that no such injustices exist. History suggests, however, that this will often not be the case, and that we will develop better ways of learning about and understanding injustices if we approach our theorizing in this way. We should, then, very often defer to the pure moral testimony of others.

I do not think we should be unduly worried about this suggestion. For one thing, we need not worry, on these grounds, about the concerns pressed by epistemic pessimists. Assuming that we can identify people who are marginalized in relevant ways, we can identify people with relevant kinds of moral expertise. If we want to fully understand the injustices faced by those in prison, for example, then at least one of the groups we ought to engage with will be that consisting of prisoners and ex-prisoners.

We might, I suggest, learn a wider lesson from the foregoing; a lesson that has been pressed in different ways by Borman and by Marcus Lee, Neil Sinclair, and Jon Robson (2020). This is that we can only do moral philosophy well if we understand moralizing as a fundamentally interpersonal, communal activity. Perhaps, if we were each to think of ourselves primarily as independent, autonomous moral judges, each aiming only to perfect our own moral understanding and character, then we might think it harmful to our moral development to defer to the moral testimony of others. To state such a view, however, is to show its implausibility. *We* want to judge well so that *we* might all act as well as possible towards one another. As many have argued, the practice of moralizing is, fundamentally, a group practice.

Of course, this general claim may be expanded on in various, often very different ways. For example, expressivists, like Sinclair (2021), argue that moralizing is fundamentally the practice of trying to agree with others about how to act or what to value. They typically focus on the role of moral language within this practice. Care ethicists, like Nel Noddings (1986), argue that relationships of caring and of being cared for are the central elements of moralizing. They

focus on relationships, both between people who are closely related and those who are more distantly related.

I do not think we need to consider such details here, important though they are. All that matters for our purposes is the insight that we cannot *do* morality properly without heeding and engaging with the different experiences, values, practices, and beliefs of others. But if we take this insight seriously, then we should be neither surprised nor concerned to realize that we might often need to rely on the testimony of others. Therefore, I think we should accept that we ought, at least sometimes, to defer to the testimony of people who experience injustices as we do not, and who are therefore better placed than us to know about and to understand those injustices.

Let me conclude by stressing a point emphasized both by Dotson and by Pearlman and Williams. If we are to gain the kinds of moral understanding that we want from working with marginalized people, then we have a duty to ensure not only that we avoid exploiting them but also that they too gain from our deliberations. We must do philosophy in a way that suits and benefits all involved. What the relevant benefits are to be, of course, will depend on the people concerned. But it may be that we will often have a duty to help make material differences in the lives of those with whom we philosophize. Philosophers may, perhaps, be obliged to be significantly more politically active than has historically been the case.

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