Ordinary Ethical Navigation

An Account of Moral Understanding

THÈSE DE DOCTORAT

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In memory of my grandmothers, Alexina and Denise

And of Iduna

That is why it is also hard work to be excellent […] anyone who aims at [virtue] must first of all steer clear of the most contrary extreme, following the advice that [Circe] also gives: 'Hold the ship outside the spray and surge.' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*)

It was hard to see how Clem could have […] never noticed that success or failure depended on being a water boatman, skimming, instead of a diver and getting everyone wet with an enormous splash whenever anything interesting passed through the deep water. (Natasha Pulley, *The Bedlam Stacks*)

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Abstract

This dissertation defends an account of moral understanding as the competence to navigate ethical life. The nature of moral understanding is an object of controversy. Some claim that it can be reduced to a form of moral knowledge. Others claim that moral understanding is a complex moral epistemic good that cannot be reduced to a form of moral knowledge. I argue that this dispute dissolves once we acknowledge that the debate about the nature of moral understanding is one about the kind of epistemic competence a moral agent should develop and exercise. Against the view that moral understanding is an explanatory competence and the view that it is the capacity to gain moral knowledge, I argue that moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life. Through this navigation, one forms moral beliefs that speak to one's agency, such that one successfully figures out what one should do. This competence is characterized by the abilities to be epistemically engaged with humility and to appreciate moral reason. Humble epistemic engagement is primarily guided by an attentional activity—moral attention—deemed the proper mark of the active moral agent by Iris Murdoch. Appreciation follows from normative experience resulting from the emotional experience of the subject. As a result, moral understanding is a necessary, although not sufficient, constituent of moral competence. This account aligns with the intuitions whereby moral understanding is something one should possess oneself—it should not be outsourced—whilst accepting help from peers. It also accommodates the fundamental intuitions that this moral epistemic good implies a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do. I distinguish, moreover, between two significantly different deficits of moral understanding. Ordinary lack of moral understanding is in cases in which one's navigation is compromised by one's lack of epistemic engagement. Failed moral agency is in cases where one does not navigate to live well. Only the former deficit can be remedied. Explaining why ordinary ethical navigation fails, in turn, sheds light on the puzzling reality that people, although active and well-intentioned, are often ill-equipped to find their way in ethical life. Becoming clearer on the nature of moral understanding reveals that moral competence involves as much epistemic as practical engagement. The account also provides a novel set of conceptual tools for thinking about the way ordinary moral experience influences moral understanding.

Introduction

Literary fiction provides a rich array of examples for thinking about moral agency and its successes and potential mishaps. The complexity of these narratives can also provide a privileged route to appreciate how the intricacies of our moral experiences influence our understanding of moral situations. Consider, for instance, the lessons we can garner from the lives of the characters of Charles Dickens's 1854 novel *Hard Times*. The story, woven around that of Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, a man particularly dedicated to doing what is right, mirrors the tragic fact that intentions are not enough to live well; that even the best-intentioned moral agent can be led wildly astray. Mr. Gradgrind is a very confident moral agent. He strikes one, at first, as someone who knows what he is doing and what he has to do. Yet, we are soon forced to acknowledge that his confidence reflects a fantasy of his own making: Gradgrind is not doing what he should. Despite everything, Gradgrind is sorely lacking in moral understanding. To see this, consider the determining scene of the story, where Mr. Gradgrind is shaken out of a form of enduring moral blindness by the plight of his eldest daughter, Louisa:

> "What is it? I conjure you Louisa, tell me what is the matter."
> She dropped into a chair before him, and put her cold hand on his arm.
> "Father, you have trained me from my cradle."
> "Yes, Louisa."
> "I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny."
> He looked at her in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating, "Curse the hour? Curse the hour?"
> "How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!"
> She struck herself with both her hands upon her bosom.
> […]
> "What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself; but O! if you had only done so long ago, […] what a much better and much happier creature I should have been this day!"
> On hearing this, after all his care, he bowed his head upon his hand and groaned aloud.
> […]
> "Father, if you had known, when we were last together here, what even I feared while I strove against it […] would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate?"
> He said, "No. No, my poor child." […]
> "I never knew you were unhappy my child." […]
> "And you so young, Louisa!" he said with pity. […]
> "What can I do, child? Ask me what you will."

> […] "All I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!"
> He tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor, but she cried out in a terrible voice, "I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!" And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet." (Dickens 2012, 238–42)

Louisa suffered, from childhood to the beginning of her adult life, under the weight of her father's "system" of education. Although there is no doubt that Gradgrind loves his daughter and wants the best for her, he has been blind to some crucial facts all along. He wants to be a good parent, but something has prevented him from understanding how to provide her with the care that she needs. Something went wrong with his "system" and Louisa is imploring him to acknowledge this. Moreover, Louisa's desperate attempt to convey these facts to her father shows that Gradgrind can be made to understand. The depth of his blindness, prior to the ultimate scene of awakening, is disconcerting. Once he finally sees all that he has been missing out on, once Louisa provides him with the missing pieces of knowledge, once she finally strikes the right chords, Gradgrind promptly responds and seizes his chance to make things right. His actions are directly influenced by these novel insights. The story illustrates our common-sense thinking that deficiency of understanding undermines agency.

Though he might come off as a bit of a caricature, Mr. Gradgrind is no anomaly. It is a familiar phenomenon to desire to do what is right, but to err. That this is so, however, is no platitude, but rather something of a puzzle. Gradgrind's predicament is puzzling because he is not a bad person and we might assume that he values things like care, fairness, friendship and respect, even love. He is not at a loss with regard to what generally matters ethically. The fact that he misses out on certain facts nevertheless dramatically influences his moral competence. Gradgrind's situation is all the more puzzling given the *confidence* with which he directs his actions. The puzzle is one of moral agency: how can an active, confident, and well-intentioned moral agent be led so astray in his actions? We might find that this puzzle speaks to our experience. Do we not sometimes find ourselves, once new facts come to our attention, struck by the inadequacy of our actions, thinking "Now I understand! Oh, what have I been missing out on all along! How wrong I was"? Are we not also prompted, when a friend, for instance, who is generally fair and good-hearted, persists in telling sexist jokes, to say to them: "Please, you have to understand that you cannot say this"? Assuming: "If you understood, you would not say such things"? In these moments, we might think to ourselves that we should have known better or that our friend should try to understand. We are puzzled because our friend is considered more intelligent than her actions convey. Why does she miss the mark? Why did we

get it wrong? The intuitive view is that one's good or deficient understanding is intimately related to what one does, that a form of moral understanding is closely tied to our moral agency and that shortcomings insidiously take place when this understanding is lacking.

But how are we to understand the idea of having or lacking moral understanding? What is moral understanding? Why do moral agents lack such understanding? And can such deficiencies in moral understanding take different forms? My aim in this dissertation is to provide answers to these questions. In doing so, I hope to give support to and illuminate an intuition of common-sense thinking, to contribute to the debate about the nature of moral understanding in moral epistemology, to strengthen our understanding of the relation between this moral phenomenon and moral agency, and thus to shed some light on the aforementioned puzzle. For, as will become apparent, the story I end up telling is one of moral competence grounded in a novel account of what moral understanding is and of the way it engages moral agency. On this account, moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life successfully, a competence characterized by the abilities to appreciate moral reasons and to be epistemically engaged with humility. Through this navigation moral considerations speak to one's agency, such that one can successfully figure out what one should do. As a result, moral understanding is a necessary, although not sufficient, constituent of competent moral agency, prompting us to engage with our moral surroundings in subtle and intricate ways to find our way.

The investigation will first be organized around the contemporary debate about the nature of moral understanding. An increasingly popular debate in moral epistemology concerns the question of whether moral understanding is reducible to a form of moral knowledge. It is worth reviewing this debate at the outset, since it provides a thorough and systematic engagement with this moral phenomenon and therefore offers a natural entry point for an investigation into this theme. As we saw, Mr. Gradgrind gains valuable knowledge from Louisa. As such, one might conclude that an active, confident, well-intentioned moral agent can be led astray in his actions when he over-estimates his own moral knowledge. Gradgrind would thus lack knowledge, not moral understanding. The story becomes more complex, however, once we discover, as I will argue, that the ramifications of this debate go beyond the question of the nature of an epistemic achievement. For, as we will see, with my effort to reconcile the opposing sides in the debate, moral understanding is not another epistemic achievement, akin to true belief and knowledge, but a *moral epistemic competence* intimately tied to moral agency. One forms true beliefs and gains moral knowledge on the basis of one's moral understanding. Mr. Gradgrind might as such lack both moral knowledge *and* moral

understanding. If that is correct, then the success of his recovery does not hang solely on the gain of this novel knowledge, but, as the discussion of this debate will bring to the fore, on something that he can *do himself*—on abilities characteristic of a competence he can exercise to figure out what he should do. Indeed, the *Explanatory Account* of moral understanding, with its defense of moral understanding as the competence to explain why a moral proposition is true, is *primarily* an account of the agential character of this epistemic good. This is because the central claims of this account are that moral understanding is something one does oneself, and it cannot be gained from the testimony of others. Gaining clarity on the nature of this competence is a second reason to engage with this debate, and with the Explanatory Account specifically.

As we will see, we can garner fundamental intuitions about the conditions to be met by an account of moral understanding from the Explanatory Account. However, these intuitions will turn out to play against the explanatory abilities promoted by the view itself. Uncovering the limits of the Explanatory Account will allow us to move closer to the nature of the abilities characteristic of moral understanding. Indeed, the theoretically oriented framework of the view, with its emphasis on explanatory reasons, sets limits that call for an analysis of moral understanding as a competence that relies on abilities of the *heart*, but that are no less epistemically significant. A necessary condition of moral understanding, as I will argue, is a relation of *appreciation* with moral reasons issuing from the *emotional experience* of the subject. Gradgrind, indeed, as he improves his competence, not only gains novel knowledge thanks to Louisa, but feels differently about her and her predicament. He is first worried, then feels doubt and dread. As the conversation unfolds, we are presented with a man filled with pity and sadness. The morning after their encounter, we find a changed man, admitting: "The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet" (Dickens 2012, 246). We find a restored father, holding his daughter's hand with tenderness, himself trembling. We find a man for whom the shock revived abilities to *feel* that he did not suspect he had. The markedly salient phenomenology of emotional experiences engages the subject with the world, as I will argue, and issues an experience of the world as demanding something of one *and* of one answering these demands. At this point in the analysis, I propose, therefore, that the common-sense idea that moral understanding influences the course of our moral competence will be best investigated via a critical examination of the account of moral understanding that is explicitly aimed at explaining this idea, and that such an examination will expand and enhance our understanding of this moral phenomenon and its role in our moral lives. The result will be a deepened appreciation of the truth to be found in respect of our common-sense intuitions about

moral understanding, and of what is right, but mainly of what is misguided, in the recent and important development on the nature of this moral epistemic good.

Yet, affective and appreciative abilities alone cannot account for the abilities that are characteristic of moral understanding. Gradgrind recovers his abilities not just to feel, as his heart opens, but also to see, that is to *attend*. It is the fruitful combination of emotional insights together with a form of epistemic engagement that will successfully guide ethical navigation. I will rely on an analysis of Iris Murdoch's notions of *ego* and *moral attention* to specify the nature of this epistemic engagement and to explain why it is warranted. It is necessary to turn to these Murdochian notions since, in my view, they target the questions raised by the aforementioned puzzle of moral agency. According to Murdoch's notion of ego, moral agents are prone to suffer a form of blindness, which keeps morally relevant considerations concealed from them. Moral agents thus need to rely on an attentional activity that shapes moral experience, to circumvent their proneness to epistemic shortcomings. The end result will be a deepened understanding of the reasons why moral agents face deficits of moral understanding and of whether and how these deficits can be remedied. As it turns out, Mr. Gradgrind's moral incompetence is rooted not in a particularly vicious character, but in ordinary deficiencies. It is thus no longer puzzling why active, confident, and well-intentioned moral agents can be led astray in their actions, for this distraction is, for better or worse, part of the fabric of their ordinary moral experience.

In addition to the aforementioned philosophical contributions that I hope this research will make, I also wish it to call attention to, and take part in clarifying, the underpinnings of enduring problems of social justice. Today, more than ever, there is widespread and vocal opposition to unfair discrimination. Philosophy has helped to unearth the presence and nature of the dynamics of oppression and systematic discrimination against women, people of color, nonhuman animals, and others. But our philosophical efforts should not cease until we have a better understanding of what keeps these structures of injustice in place. Social movements pushing back, like Animal Liberation and Black Lives Matter, despite their best efforts, might find themselves at a loss when seeking the right way to make progress. For, in reality, they do not have a single villain to fight against. Rather, the devil, as it is said, lies in the details. One might be forced to acknowledge that persisting dynamics of oppression and systematic structures of discrimination are maintained by very ordinary beliefs, habits, and practices. The problem, moreover, is often not one of motivation, but rather, and in relation to the common-sense thought I discussed above, one of understanding. This calls on us to further understand the phenomenon whereby well-intentioned, what we might call "ordinary" people often cause

harm to others and themselves because of epistemic shortcomings, and because—I suspect—they lack competence in figuring out how to move beyond these drawbacks. Such competence would include, for instance, the ability to recognize what aspects of reality demand their attention and their actions. Part of the motivation underlying this research is thus to contribute to the comprehension of these delicate moral issues. Many of the examples used to illustrate the arguments defended here will reflect this concern. The present research is thus important because it should target a common, but undertheorized moral phenomenon. The puzzle I raise is hence not one for moral skeptics, but one for ordinary moral agents. Accordingly, I also wish for the account to provide a novel set of tools for thinking about the way our ordinary moral experience influences our moral understanding. The details of the specific chapters of the dissertation are as follows.

To clarify the nature of moral understanding, in Chapter 1, I consider the contemporary debate opposing nonreductionists and reductionists about moral understanding. The former argue that moral understanding cannot be reduced to a form of moral knowledge, whereas the latter argue that such reduction is possible. I argue that we need to reconcile these opponents to move beyond their superficial divergences. The reconciliation should show that both sides support the idea that moral understanding is an epistemic competence wherewith one can form moral beliefs and gain moral knowledge. Reconciliation asks that the debate about the nature of moral understanding be situated within the context from which the contemporary notion originated. Some have introduced the notion of moral understanding to argue that mature moral agents should not rely on moral testimony. The question of moral understanding is, in other words, intertwined with a puzzle about the legitimacy of moral testimony, which issues into a debate that opposes optimists to pessimists about moral testimony. I argue that both debates can be boiled down into one. As we will see, their disagreement regards whether it is acceptable for mature moral agents to rely on moral testimony, the nature of moral understanding, and the primary epistemic goal of a moral agent. We can gather, following the reconciliation, that the puzzle about moral testimony does not teach us something about the value of different moral epistemic achievements, as is assumed, but rather about what we expect a moral agent to be able to do epistemically. The genuine debate is about the kind of epistemic abilities a moral agent should develop and exercise. Certain forms of moral testimony, as I will argue, hinder the development and exercise of moral understanding—when it is relied upon to figure out what to do as a practice. As it is part of the *integrity* of moral agency not to rely on moral testimony as a practice to figure out what to do, moral agents should develop and exercise their moral understanding. As a result, I claim that moral testimony is not negative in itself, but only

when it compromises (or risks compromising) one's moral understanding. The substantial questions we are left with, at the end of this chapter, are the following: What kind of competence is moral understanding? What abilities are characteristic of this competence?

Chapter 2 consists of a detailed critical examination of the Explanatory Account of moral understanding. It provides, as such, our first investigative step into the nature of the abilities characteristic of this competence and the nature of the competence itself. I consider, following the Explanatory Account, whether moral understanding is characterized by specific explanatory abilities. After presenting the main claims of the account, I argue that the relevant explanatory abilities, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are neither sufficient nor necessary for one to have moral understanding. To defend these claims, I first raise the objection that we can imagine a person proficient in all the relevant explanatory abilities, while importantly lacking moral understanding. This person lacks moral understanding, crucially, on the basis of the very intuitions that the Explanatory Account relies on to first outline this epistemic good. I then investigate the possibility that this person might mislead us into thinking she has moral understanding because she can identify moral reasons. This uncovers the idea that this person is lacking, as I will argue, a relation of appreciation with those reasons. Appreciating moral reasons, as we will see, is necessary, but not sufficient to have moral understanding. One might thus still claim that the relevant explanatory abilities, while insufficient, are necessary, in addition to appreciation, to have moral understanding. I raise a second objection to argue against this claim. If we can imagine—and I argue that we can—a paradigmatically competent, but inarticulate moral agent, one who cannot explain why a moral proposition is true, then it seems unacceptable to say that she does not have moral understanding. This objection should show that the explanatory abilities, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are not necessary to have moral understanding. This thus leaves us in need of another possible account of this competence.

In Chapter 3, I defend an account of moral understanding as a competence to navigate ethical life successfully. With this competence, one has the ability (or abilities) to recognize and relate different—at first seemingly unrelated—non-moral and moral considerations in terms of their relevance to living well. The abilities characteristic of this competence are that of being engaged epistemically with humility and that of appreciating moral reasons. If one of these abilities is compromised, as I will argue, then navigation fails—moral understanding is lacking. This account is warranted because it can accommodate the conditions for an account of moral understanding we have drawn from the previous chapters. To answer the questions with which I started this investigation, I argue that there are two significantly different ways of

lacking moral understanding. The first, ordinary lack of moral understanding is in cases where one's appreciation is compromised by a lack of epistemic engagement. The second, failed moral agency is in cases where one's appreciation is compromised because one does not attempt to live well. Ordinary moral agents, unlike failed moral agents, can remedy their deficits of moral understanding.

These proposals—that moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life successfully and that ordinary lack of moral understanding is a failure of navigation that can be remedied—are in need of further development and support, however. For if it seems obvious that moral agents experience epistemic shortcomings, we still need to explain why these take place and to account for the kind of epistemic engagement that can counter them. In Chapter 4, I attempt to specify the nature of this epistemic engagement and to explain its need by appealing to the Murdochian notions of *ego* and *moral attention*. If Murdoch is right to claim that the ego presents moral agents with an epistemic challenge because it narrows their experience and thus conceals part of reality from them, and if she is right to claim that moral attention counteracts the ego, then we have an outline of both epistemic engagement and the reasons why it is needed. To fill in this outline I analyze the ideas of ego and moral attention by means of the Structuring Mind theory of attention. Building off of this theory, I argue that moral attention—or attending— is a form of attention *actively guided with low control*. When attending, a moral agent is active in promoting an attitude which is itself passive. This attitude promotes a form of openness to the world that enables ethically relevant items to enter one's structures of salience, thus counteracting the workings of the ego.

One cannot navigate if one does not feel, but one needs to see clearly in order to feel correctly. The attentional activity presented in Chapter 4 will thus be central to guide moral experience so as to allow one to feel the right emotions. While some emotions appear to support epistemic engagement, others appear to support the ego. As we will see in the final chapter, emotions, although they can sometimes have deleterious influences, nevertheless have two distinct roles to play in the account of moral understanding I defend here. For, in as much as they capture and maintain our attention on emotional objects, they can drive humble epistemic engagement. Moreover, in virtue of their distinct phenomenology, they reveal what a moral situation demands of one. To argue for these claims, I first consider, but reject, the view that normative character is presented by experiences of prescriptive affordances. We have stronger reasons, I argue, to consider emotional experiences as the right candidates. For, as we will see, the demanding character of moral considerations can be presented through emotional experiences because they are experiences of *value*. Emotions are finally good for the

epistemology of normative properties, I argue, because their distinct phenomenology is necessary to understand what an evaluative situation demands of one. I defend this with an account of emotional experience characterized by three phenomenal constraints (importance, self-engagement, action-readiness). It is the complex experience given by the interaction of these three constraints that reveals the normative character of values. I also consider the view that emotion makes a positive epistemic contribution to our evaluative understanding by capturing and maintaining our attention on emotional objects. If this view is correct, then emotions can, in addition to their role in revealing normative character, drive humble epistemic engagement. These last specifications of my account therefore promise to deliver what the Explanatory Account of moral understanding cannot—namely a plausible way to reconcile the intuitions that moral understanding is characterized by cognitive activity and that it is set apart from other forms of understanding because it stems from the heart.

Let us proceed, then, to explore the idea that moral understanding is a moral epistemic competence that engages one in navigation, and to discover the conditions that make this navigation successful.

Chapter 1

Moral understanding is an irreducible competence

Introduction

What is the difference between someone who has moral understanding and someone who has little or no moral understanding? If anything, just as a scientist needs to have scientific understanding, or a baker understanding of baking principles, it seems that a moral agent needs to have some moral understanding. One difference, then, between a moral agent with moral understanding and one with little or no understanding is that the former is better equipped to carry out the goals of a moral agent, much like the scientist or the baker need understanding to carry out their respective goals. We might say that a moral agent with moral understanding is more *competent* than one with little or none. We might even say that moral understanding is a necessary component of moral agency. What is moral understanding?

The nature of moral understanding is an object of controversy.[1] Nonreductionists claim that moral understanding is a complex moral epistemic good that cannot be reduced to a form of moral knowledge. Reductionists claim that moral understanding is nothing above or beyond moral knowledge and can be reduced to a form of the latter. This is the contemporary debate about the nature of moral understanding. Nonreductionists additionally claim that mature moral agents have stronger reasons to gain moral understanding than to gain moral knowledge. They press the distinctiveness and greater value of moral understanding to provide a solution to a puzzle about moral testimony. Hence, to gain clarity on the nature of moral understanding and the debate surrounding it, we need to understand this puzzle.

[1] Besides the literature about this debate in moral epistemology, there is also a sparse and eclectic use of the notion of moral understanding in the contemporary moral philosophy literature more generally. For instance, Elliot Turiel (1983) argues that to have moral understanding one must understand that moral norms (and associated transgressions) regard the rights and welfare of other individuals (including not hurting others and not damaging their property). David K. Levy (2004) defends the idea that having moral understanding is having understanding of another's proper claims on one. Hannah Tierney (2019) argues that understanding the wrong one has done involves understanding – on the part of the wrongdoers, that their victims take themselves to have been wronged and to be deserving better treatment than they received. To conduct the present investigation on the nature of moral understanding, I take as a starting point the debate about the nature of moral understanding as it appears in moral epistemology.

Why might it be unacceptable to rely on moral testimony to form one's moral beliefs, when reliance on testimony per se is not only acceptable, but common practice? This question raises a puzzle for moral epistemology: the puzzle about moral testimony. One relies on moral testimony when one defers to the word of a trustworthy other to form a moral belief. Some philosophers claim that it is not satisfying for one to form moral beliefs on the back of others, even if they are trustworthy, even if one could thereby gain moral knowledge. This is the pessimists' claim. Pessimism is all the more puzzling if we consider that taking moral advice from others is acceptable and that relying on testimony per se is common practice. The challenge is to explain the asymmetry between norms surrounding moral belief and non-moral belief formation. Contra pessimists, some philosophers argue that there is no puzzle because moral agents may have good reasons to rely on moral testimony. This is the optimists' claim. This situation makes for a debate between optimists and pessimists about moral testimony.

My aim in this chapter is to reconcile the opponents in this debate about the nature of moral understanding and opponents in the debate about moral testimony. Given that both debates are related, I will argue that reconciliation is possible if and only if we consider them in light of their intertwinement. After presenting the debates in detail from Sections 1 to 4, I will argue that they can be boiled down into a single debate. Their disagreement regards the question whether it is acceptable for mature moral agents to rely on moral testimony, the nature of moral understanding, and what a moral agent's primary epistemic goal should be. I argue, in Sections 5 to 7, that opponents can find agreement about the aforementioned points because they share a deeper concern that moral agents develop and exercise moral understanding. They agree, first, that mature moral agents should be able to form their moral beliefs on their own *and* should do so. Second, they agree that the asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation is that moral, as opposed to non-moral, beliefs should be formed on the basis of one's own epistemic abilities. This is the Moral Competence Claim. Reconciliation will be reached in three steps. First, I will argue, in Section 5, that all accept that moral understanding is a competence and not an achievement. Second, I will argue, in Section 6, that all accept the Moral Competence claim and that this claim is compatible with the idea that moral agents sometimes have good reasons to rely on moral testimony. Lastly, I distinguish, in Section 7, between four forms of moral testimony and argue that all agree that we only have good reasons to be pessimistic about cases when one routinely defers to others to know what to do.

Thanks to this reconciliation we can learn about moral epistemic competence. The puzzle about moral testimony does not teach us about the value of different moral epistemic achievements, as is sometimes assumed, but rather about what we expect a moral agent to be

able to do epistemically. The debate about the nature of moral understanding is a debate about the kind of epistemic abilities a moral agent should develop and exercise. It is intertwined with the debate about moral testimony, because certain forms of moral testimony can threaten a moral agent's moral epistemic competence. Moral testimony is not negative in itself, but only when it compromises (or risks compromising) a moral agent's moral understanding. The substantial question we are left with at the end of this chapter is the following one: What kind of competence is moral understanding?

1. The puzzle about moral testimony

Moral realists have to explain why the epistemology of moral facts (e.g. facts about what is right or wrong; facts about what one has reason to do) differs from the epistemology of non-moral facts (e.g. facts about the time, train schedules, the weather, and so on). Moral realists believe that moral facts exist and that moral knowledge is possible. One has moral knowledge when one has a justified true moral belief (e.g. Paula knows that stealing is wrong).[2] Alison Hills (2011) argues that these epistemologies differ in at least three significant ways. The first regards the fact of trusting the testimony of others: "Many people think that forming your beliefs about moral matters on the basis of the word of someone else is […] in many circumstances unacceptable" (Hills 2011, 249). However, trusting the testimony of trustworthy others about such matters as time or location is not only acceptable, but is part of daily practice. The second difference is the asymmetry between deference to experts for moral and non-moral questions. The difficulty is that there are no obvious experts to defer to when it comes to moral questions, whereas expertise in non-moral fields is common currency. We defer to expert entomologists, climate scientists, mechanics without controversy, but we do not easily defer to moral experts (i.e. people who have (or would have) comparatively more propositional moral knowledge than the rest of us). Moreover, the kind of distrust many have toward moral experts does not lie in the difficulty in identifying such persons. A third, related difference is that whereas we find it acceptable to give weight to the opinions of others for non-moral questions,

[2] There is considerable agreement (albeit challenged by Gettier 1963) that knowledge of a proposition involves at least three elements: truth, belief, and justification (Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons 1996). The idea is that one cannot know something which is false: to "know that *p*," *p* needs to be true. Moreover, it is generally agreed that the subject must hold the content of the proposition in an attitude of believing; if *S* does not believe the proposition (say, if S merely suspects it), *S* cannot know it (an exception is Williamson 2002, who suggests that believing and knowing are two different mental states). And if one's true belief is to count as knowledge, then the person must have come to form the belief for good enough reasons or based on good enough evidence: a true belief requires something like justification, warrant (Roberts and Wood 2007; Zimmerman 2010) or adequate evidence (Chisholm 1957) to count as knowledge. Similarly, moral knowledge is knowledge as justified true belief with moral content.

doing so raises resistance in the case of moral questions. In other words, we feel like we need to form our own opinions about moral issues (e.g. issues as serious as abortion or euthanasia), but we willingly give weight to the opinion of others for such things as botany or cooking. Hence, the general intuition is that it is not satisfying for one to form moral beliefs on the back of others, even if these others are trustworthy, even if one could thereby gain moral knowledge. These three features of moral epistemology are all the more puzzling if we consider that taking *moral advice* from others is acceptable and often recommendable. This raises a puzzle for moral epistemology: the puzzle about moral testimony.[3] The challenge is to explain why it is acceptable to take advice from those whose judgment we trust when it comes to moral matters, but unacceptable to rely on their testimony.

One relies on moral testimony when one forms a moral belief by relying on the word of another person. One believes that p because the other said that p. This kind of reliance is deference. Deference is "to believe that p because the speaker has said that p, whatever your other reasons for or against believing that p" (Hills 2019, 469). Importantly, both members of the testimonial exchange can have the same beliefs about non-moral facts. Moral testimony is when a person defers to another to form beliefs with moral content, irrespective of whether one forms a belief about a proposition with thin moral content ("Eating meat is *wrong*"), thick moral content ("Factory farming practices are *cruel*"), or forms a moral belief about what to do ("I should not eat meat"). A common example of moral testimony discussed in the literature is the following:

> Eleanor has always enjoyed eating meat, but has recently realized that it raises some moral issues. Rather than thinking further about these, however, she talks to a friend, who tells her that eating meat is wrong. Eleanor knows that her friend is normally trustworthy and reliable, so she believes her and accepts that eating meat is wrong.[4]

Eleanor relies on the word of her friend, not to gain information, for instance, about the conditions of factory farming or about animal sentience, but to form the moral belief that eating meat is wrong. Many consider that the case of Eleanor differs from that of Sarah:

> Sarah is five years old. Her parents have told her not to lie, that lying is naughty and wrong. She accepts what they say. (Hills 2009, 98)

[3] The claim that there is a puzzle about moral testimony appears, for instance, in (Hills 2009; 2010; 2011; 2013) and McGrath 2009, who calls it the puzzle of pure moral deference.
[4] This example is discussed in (Hills 2010, 94) and Sliwa 2012. McGrath 2009 discusses a similar example.

Many believe that it is acceptable for Sarah, who is a young child, to rely on the word of her parents to form her moral beliefs. It is acceptable for children to rely on moral testimony during the process of their moral development, but it is unacceptable for mature moral agents to defer to others. This is the position of pessimists about moral testimony (hereafter *pessimists*) (see (Nickel 2001; Hopkins 2007; Hills 2009; 2011; 2013; McGrath 2008; 2011).[5] We can trace pessimism at least back to Aristotle: "He who grasps everything himself is best of all; he is noble also who listens to one who has spoken well; but he who neither grasps it himself nor takes to heart what he hears from another is a useless man" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b 10-14).[6][7] Pessimists claim: "Once you have reached maturity as an adult and have the ability to think about moral questions by yourself—as Eleanor can—it seems […] that you have strong reasons to do so, indeed that refusing to do so is unacceptable"(Hills 2010, 95). To pessimists, although cases like Sarah are acceptable, cases like Eleanor are troubling.

The pessimists' distrust targets the legitimacy of deferring to others as mature moral agents, irrespective of the epistemic advantages this confers. Pessimism is not about the possibility of gaining moral knowledge through testimony. Pessimists accept that this is possible. Their distrust lies elsewhere. According to pessimists, mature moral agents have strong reasons not to rely on others to form their moral beliefs or judge the truth of a moral claim, *even if* these others are reliable and trustworthy, *even if* this reliance could provide them with moral knowledge. They question the worth of relying on moral testimony *at all*, even if it provides one with moral knowledge.

Pessimists about moral testimony raise what they take to be an important concern for moral epistemology. It is generally agreed that the questions "Is moral knowledge possible?" and "How can we gain moral knowledge?" guide inquiry in moral epistemology.[8] If the primary concern of moral epistemology is moral knowledge, then our primary moral epistemic goal is to possess moral knowledge. It should not matter how we come to this knowledge, as long as it is gained reliably. If we accept their concern, then pessimists raise a puzzle for those who

[5] Bernard Williams (1995), in *Making Sense of Humanity*, also defends a form of pessimism, but framed around deference to moral experts rather than testimony.

[6] All subsequent references will be to this edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, abbreviated *NE*, followed by the relevant Bekker page, column, and line numbers.

[7] Pessimism toward moral deference is also a topic in a number of Plato's early dialogues, as McGrath (2009, Section 6), discusses. The problems Plato raises toward moral deference stem from a more general concern toward moral expertise and the difficulties in identifying such experts. As we will see, the pessimistic view can be endorsed for both epistemic and moral reasons. It seems that Plato rather emphasized the former and Aristotle the latter.

[8] This is how it is characterized in the *Routledge Handbook of Moral Epistemology* (Zimmerman, Jones, and Timmons 2019).

accept that moral facts and moral knowledge exist and are accessible. If relying on the testimony of trustworthy others is generally considered a legitimate source of knowledge, then, as Sarah McGrath writes, "moral deference should strike us as no more peculiar than deference about scientific matters or geography" (McGrath 2009, 12).[9] It would even be epistemically irrational to refuse to give weight to (or to regard as a mistake) reliance on the testimony of others to form our moral beliefs if we can gain moral knowledge therewith. Pessimists, nevertheless, stand their ground: it is a problem to form our moral beliefs on the testimony of others, even trustworthy others.

Those who do not find the pessimists' concern legitimate deny that there is anything problematic in mature moral agents forming their moral beliefs through testimony. This is the optimists' position. This creates a debate between pessimists and optimists about moral testimony.

I argue that this opposition is ill-founded. Pessimists argue that there are "strong reasons" for mature moral agents not to rely on the word of others to form their moral beliefs. Moral agents, to put it simply, should think about moral questions by themselves. Optimists deny this claim. They argue, on the contrary, that mature moral agents sometimes have strong reasons to defer to others when faced with a moral question. I argue that pessimists and optimists, despite their superficial divergences, agree on both claims. However, this agreement is overlooked because of a misunderstanding about the nature of the reasons why one should not rely on moral testimony. The puzzle about moral testimony urges us to clarify the nature of the *strong reasons* for mature moral agents not to rely on such testimony. Once the nature of these reasons is clarified, the disagreement dissolves. To defend this, in the next section, I first present the reasons optimists provide to defend moral testimony. Then I discuss, in Section 3, the reasons pessimists provide to support their distrust of moral testimony.

2. Optimism about moral testimony

Does moral testimony really present a puzzle for moral epistemology? If it does, then is there a solution to this puzzle? If it does not, then why are pessimists so distrustful? Note that non-

[9] There is a consensus that we can gain knowledge about ordinary (non-moral) facts through testimony, but controversy, between reductionists and non-reductionists about testimonial knowledge, on the conditions to be met for knowledge to be gained. Non-reductionists see testimonial knowledge as a simple phenomenon, that can justify belief as legitimately as sense-perception, memory, and inductive reference. Reductionists claim that additional good reasons are needed (other than the testimony itself) to accept the word of a speaker and count as having thereby gained knowledge. On this debate, see for instance Lackey 2003; Lackey and Sosa 2006.

cognitivists[10]—who deny the existence of moral facts and claim that moral judgments do not express beliefs, but exhibit attitudes of approval or disapproval—can easily explain the intuition that there is an asymmetry between the way one should form moral and non-moral beliefs: they simply deny that one forms such beliefs. Non-cognitivists can explain away the puzzle. They argue that we should not rely on others to form our moral views because the paradigmatic attitudes supporting these views cannot be formed through deference.[11] It is a greater challenge to deny that there is a puzzle about moral testimony while assuming that moral facts exist and that we form beliefs about them. Optimists about moral testimony (hereafter *optimists*) argue that mature moral agents not only can trust the practice of deferring to others, just as they trust testimony with regard to non-moral matters, but that they often have good reasons to do so (Thomas 1993; Jones 1999; Fricker 2006; Sliwa 2012; Wiland 2021). I discuss here three of those reasons.

First, according to optimists, we have good reasons to defer to the word of a trustworthy other to form our moral beliefs, when the experience of this other is inaccessible to us and is morally relevant (it can be inaccessible because we cannot imagine it, because we have never had a similar experience, and so on). To illustrate this, Karen Jones (1999) gives the example of Peter who, she argues, should trust his female roommates when they report cases of sexism during interviews with potential new roommates. Peter should defer, that is, even if he can rarely himself identify sexism. Peter needs to know about these instances of sexism to be able to decide who to accept in their household. However, never being himself the victim of sexism, he is not attuned to the particular instances of this form of discrimination and needs the help of others to gain this knowledge. The Peter example, moreover, is a case where moral deference is owed. According to Laurence Thomas: "Moral deference is meant to reflect the insight that it is wrong to discount the feelings and experiences of persons of diminished social groups simply because their articulation of matters does not resonate with one's imaginative take on their experiences" (Thomas 1993, 244). Thomas gives as examples that of owing deference to the experience of victims of a holocaust or of slavery. The idea that one can be wronged by not being given proper deference or by receiving too little credibility for one's testimony is

[10] For further readings on the views defended by non-cognitivists, see van Roojen 2018.

[11] Nevertheless, non-cognitivism faces the problem, as Hills (2011) points out, of explaining our practices of asking for moral advice: if moral judgments are the expression of attitudes, why do we ask others about their attitudes? How is this epistemically relevant?

thematized by Miranda Fricker (2007, Chapter 1) as *testimonial injustice*. In this respect, one not only has epistemic reasons to trust moral testimony, but also moral reasons.[12]

Second, optimists argue that we have reasons to rely on moral testimony when, as we are reflecting on what to do, we face too great uncertainty. Paulina Sliwa (2012) argues that we have good reasons to rely on the word of others when we fear that our moral judgment is compromised (e.g. by self-interest) or biased.[13] In such cases, relying on the word of a trustworthy other, who assesses the situation for us (e.g. relying on another to tell us that a person *is* being bullied), can be the epistemically rational thing to do.

Third, we have reasons to rely on moral testimony, when we think that a reliable other (e.g. friend, colleague, etc.) is better than us at making moral distinctions in particular cases (e.g. better than us at identifying that a practice is unfair or a remark hurtful). This is because, as Sliwa argues, learning to apply moral concepts requires practice and experience. Discriminating between particular moral cases is similar, she says, to the process of learning, for instance, to read an X-ray: experience of a number of different cases and practice at deciphering the intricate features of the picture are needed to come to read the situation proficiently, especially for tricky cases. Relying on the word of a trustworthy other in cases where one is less experienced (as when a medical doctor relies on the word of a trustworthy colleague) importantly contributes to one's understanding of the moral situation. Hence, according to optimists, we have epistemic reasons to rely on the word of a trustworthy other to form our moral beliefs, when this other's experience can provide us with moral information that would otherwise remain inaccessible to us (or too difficult to access). We also have moral reasons to defer in cases where it is morally problematic to assume that we can have access to this information on our own.

Optimists make a compelling case to justify the claim that moral agents should sometimes rely on moral testimony. Many of the reasons they provide are epistemic: mature moral agents should sometimes rely on moral testimony to gain more moral knowledge. Do pessimists reject these reasons? Recall, from Section 1, that pessimists do not deny that moral testimony can provide one with moral knowledge. They do not deny that moral testimony can

[12] This is a point generally defended by feminist standpoint theory. Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that makes certain knowledge accessible to them in ways that it is not accessible to non-marginalized groups. See Hartsock 1998.

[13] Note that in this particular argument, Sliwa says that this is a case where one relies on moral advice. However, in the same paper, she makes the argument that relying on advice (as in these cases) is relying on moral testimony. Rearticulating cases of moral advice as cases of moral testimony is part of her argument in favor of moral testimony. Considering, she argues, that we find practices of asking for moral advice uncontroversial, we should not find moral testimony controversial either.

improve a moral agent's epistemic standing. Still, pessimists would deny that relying on moral testimony is good enough. Why? In Section 6, I will come back to the position defended by optimists and argue that pessimists accept, after all, their claim. Before that, however, we need to better understand why pessimists might at first dismiss it, that is, why they might dismiss both the epistemic and moral reasons provided by optimists to defend moral testimony. Let us turn to the source of the pessimists' distrust.

3. Pessimism and moral understanding

Pessimists argue that moral agents have reasons to gain a moral epistemic good other than moral knowledge:

> When discussing moral realism, I suggested that, if we could gain moral knowledge through testimony, we would have reasons to trust moral testimony. But that assumes that we want, or have reasons to try to gain, moral knowledge. Perhaps we prefer or have stronger reasons to try to gain something else: moral understanding. (Hills 2011, 255)

Pessimists argue that moral agents have reasons not to rely on moral testimony, even if they can gain moral knowledge doing so, by defending the higher value of *moral understanding*.

Moral understanding is an epistemic achievement more complex and more valuable than moral knowledge. Hills (2009; 2010; 2011) thematized at length the value of moral understanding. One who has moral understanding does not need to rely on others to judge the truth of a moral claim, to form one's moral beliefs or to decide what to do. As such, when one develops and exercises moral understanding, one is credited with one's moral epistemic achievements. Moreover, moral understanding is important for morally worthy action: to do the right action, for the right reasons.[14] Similarly, granted that moral understanding acquaints one more reliably with moral reasons, this allows one to justify her actions or choices to others.[15] Lastly, having moral understanding is considered valuable because it is part of being virtuous. Indeed, a virtuous agent understands what is good and is motivated to do what is good. Understanding what is good (or right, or courageous, or what one has most reasons to do), according to Hills, amounts to the cognitive aspect of virtue.

In making these claims about moral understanding, pessimists follow epistemologists who argue for the value of understanding over knowledge. Jonathan Kvanvig suggests that

[14] A point defended by Hills 2009 and Howard 2018.
[15] This should allow people to understand each other better and to make sense of their choices.

common intuition values understanding over knowledge (e.g. most would agree that the accumulation of propositional knowledge, such as the one favored in games like Trivial Pursuit, is not as valuable as the reach of understanding).[16] Defenders of understanding do not deny a relation between knowledge and understanding, but they argue that something sets understanding apart: "The assumption is, I believe, that the kind of understanding at issue when regarding our cognitive successes and achievements is some type of deep and comprehensive knowledge concerning a particular subject, topic, or issue" (Kvanvig 2003, 188).

Understanding is considered different from propositional knowledge because it comes in degrees, it relates to truth differently than knowledge and involves a form of *grasp* or *grasping.* Understanding allows of degrees (e.g. one can understand Canadian politics or a language better than someone else), whereas knowledge does not come in degrees: one either knows a proposition or does not. One might say that one has gained more knowledge of a subject (e.g. a philosopher says that she knows metaethics better now than 10 years ago); however, here "knowing" is synonymous with understanding. One does not mean that one knows a larger quantity of propositions, but that one has come to make better sense of the subject matter over time.[17] Moreover, it is argued that understanding is set apart from knowledge because it cannot be true or false, but rather *adequate* or *inadequate*: "Just as a proposition is thought to be true in virtue of matching the state of affairs that it is about, so understanding anything typically has to be more or less adequate to what it is about" (Roberts and Wood 2007, 44). Once we discover the falsity of something we took ourselves to know, we withdraw the claim to knowledge. However, there is no such thing as discovering that our understanding is false; rather, we discover that we understand less than we thought.[18] We drop a false belief, but we work to understand better what we lack understanding of. The object of understanding is complex: one understands a symphony, a person, a language or a complex body of propositional and non-propositional items like a story or a scientific theory. This is why understanding aims at becoming more and more adequate to its object. Understanding, importantly, is supposed to differ from knowledge because it involves *grasping*:

> Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making

[16] Kvanvig (2003, 186), comparing propositional knowledge—knowing a lot of information—and understanding defends this general point.
[17] About the idea that understanding allows of degrees, see for instance Roberts and Wood's discussion in Chapter 2, "Goods," of *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (2007); see also Elgin 1996, Chapter 4.
[18] We might, however, discover that we held false beliefs about the matter we understand. This, according to Elgin 2017, does not prevent one from understanding. Understanding some complex phenomenon might even demand that we rest content with inaccurate, "true enough" beliefs, because true beliefs are too complex to reach.

> relationships in a large body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question […] Understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations (Kvanvig 2003, 192–93).

Understanding, then, is not about an isolated proposition. Rather, it is about grasping the relations between a set of propositions. As Kvanvig argues, what is important to understand is not tying down a true belief (i.e. ascertaining the facts about the etiology of one's belief), but relating beliefs together: understanding is fundamentally a matter of grasping connections among one's beliefs.[19] The difference he presses is that between different epistemic statuses: having understanding presupposes a grasp of how different elements relate to each other, whereas knowing does not suppose such a grasp.

The difficulty, to understand the nature of understanding, lies in clarifying the idea of grasping. In this regard, it can be helpful to consider an account of how a human infant develops understanding of the physical world she inhabits:

> In his classic works on human infancy, Piaget provided a theory of infant cognition that is the starting point for all subsequent accounts. Piaget noted that at around four months of age infants begin reaching for and grasping objects; at around eight months of age they begin looking for objects that have disappeared, even removing obstacles in their attempts to grasp them; and at around twelve to eighteen months they begin to follow the spatial displacements of objects, both visible and invisible, to new locations, and to understand something of the spatial, temporal, and causal relations among objects. Piaget hypothesized that all of these developmental changes in sensory-motor behavior were a result of infants' active manipulations and explorations of objects, as they constructed reality through converging lines of sensory and motor information. (Tomasello 1999, 57)

The infant's exploration of her environment highlights the fact that understanding intimately relates to the way one makes sense of how a number of elements—here physical elements—relate to each other. Here are examples of spatial, causal, and temporal relations. The infant manages over time, and after exploration, to map the relations between the different objects and how these objects behave in relation to the structure of the world (e.g. dropping the red cube on the blue cube makes the blue cube move). As a result of this greater understanding, the infant becomes more capable of navigating the physical world. To do this, her

[19] See Kvanvig 2003; Grimm 2006 raises two objections to this point.

understanding creates a kind of cognitive map. One grasps when one makes sense of how a number of different elements of a large body of information are related in a way which is coherent. The child grasps relations between physical objects and the place of these objects and relations in the physical world she inhabits. Grasping is the ability to draw connections between various items, information, and relations. This ability is what should differentiate understanding from knowing.

Aiming for adequacy, then, does not imply a representational constraint, but rather what could be called a constraint of *competency*: one is more adequate to its object when one is capable of doing certain things. For instance, we can imagine two tenth-grade students learning about the theory of evolution. When the final exam comes, student A explains the relation between survival and environment adaptation. This student can explain that being the fittest organism has nothing to do with being the strongest, but rather with what enables an organism to pass down its genes. She also gives various examples of the trait changes this might involve and adds detailed comments about the upshots of Darwin's theory. Student B is not capable of giving such explanations, but answers most of the multiple-choice questions. Student B knows facts about the theory of evolution from having studied the textbook, whereas student A understands the theory of evolution. Hence, coming back to the pessimists' concern, given its complexity and the abilities that grasping suggests, understanding cannot be passed down like a piece of information. It is, as such, considered not to be transmissible by testimony (Hills 2016).[20] We thus have reasons to distrust moral testimony, according to pessimists, because we cannot gain moral understanding through it.

If pessimists are right about the nature and value of moral understanding, then the puzzle reveals the value of different moral epistemic achievements. Recall from Section 1, however, that at the heart of the puzzle also lies the concern that there is an asymmetry between belief formation about moral matters and that about non-moral matters. Pessimists claim that the asymmetry is that moral beliefs should be formed on the basis of one's moral understanding, whereas this is not necessary for non-moral beliefs. This, however, still does not explain why it is more valuable to form one's moral beliefs on the basis of one's moral understanding and why this constraint applies only to moral beliefs. As the discussion on understanding simpliciter shows, it seems like understanding in general cannot be transmitted

[20] There is general agreement that understanding is not transmissible through testimony. To challenge this position, Federica Malfatti (2021) has recently argued that testimony contributes to understanding.

via testimony and that this difference does not only apply to moral understanding. Thus, even in appealing to a form of understanding, we should not find an asymmetry.

To explain this asymmetry, some suggest that a conative engagement (e.g. an affective or motivational response) is expected of an agent who has formed her moral beliefs the right way, whereas no such response is expected in relation to non-moral beliefs (e.g. Callahan 2018; Howard 2018). Like pessimists, those who defend this position believe that there is an asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation which means that moral testimony is questionable. They also accept that moral facts exist, and that moral knowledge is possible and accessible (they do not endorse non-cognitivism). However, they contend that moral beliefs are peculiar in virtue of their relation to conative attitudes and that having moral understanding involves having certain affective or motivational responses. Let us name this position pessimists-conativists.

Uncovering the relation between moral beliefs and conative attitudes should support pessimists-conativists' pessimism and offer a way to explain away the puzzle. This is what Laura Frances Callahan (2018) defends. She argues that having understanding of a moral proposition demands, in addition to an understanding of the reasons why the proposition is true, certain emotional and motivational attitudes: "Plausibly, one doesn't have understanding of the fact (or one doesn't really understand), e.g. that a certain practice is racist, if it doesn't make one angry or sad, or if one has no will to prevent or intervene in the practice, given a clear opportunity" (Callahan 2018, 452). According to Callahan, one understands *p* when "one believes that *p* and has the fitting affective/motivational response given that *p* […]" (ibid.). Following Callahan's position, one has to reject the optimists' claim that one should rely on the word of a friend to form her moral belief (e.g. to find out that a practice is unfair) even if this friend has better discriminatory skills, because this reliance does not guarantee the rise of appropriate affective/motivational responses in one.

Although pessimistic accounts of the nature of moral understanding diverge, their pessimism nevertheless converges on the concern that something important is not transmissible through moral testimony. Unlike Callahan, Hills's account of moral understanding does not suppose the rise of appropriate conative responses. According to Hills, one has moral understanding when one forms beliefs about the reasons why a moral proposition is true and one has cognitive control over that proposition (I return to her account in Section 5 and in Chapter 2). However, they agree that, although moral information *can* be passed on through moral testimony, something, so to speak, gets lost in the process.

The convergence between pessimists is important to appreciate the strength of their concern that moral understanding gets lost when one relies on moral testimony. That being said, unlike what is assumed in the current debate, I will argue that in making this claim, pessimists are not making an epistemic point, but a moral one. They raise a concern about moral competence. In other words, their discussion on moral understanding is a claim about what a competent moral agent should be able to do. Let us name this the Moral Competence claim. I develop this claim in Section 6. The difficulty, however, is not to conflate the Moral Competence claim with a claim about the value of different epistemic goods. I will argue, along lines that run contra some of the pessimists' intuitions, that the Moral Competence claim does not imply anything about the (dis)value of moral knowledge. It is, rather, a claim about the epistemic competences expected of a moral agent to develop and exercise. Pessimists make a moral, as opposed to an epistemic, claim because: 1) they do not claim that relying on the word of others to find one's way around moral questions is epistemically wrong; 2) they do not challenge the epistemology of moral facts; and 3) they do not challenge the value of moral knowledge. They claim that moral agents have strong reasons not to rely on moral testimony because it interferes with the development and exercise of their epistemic competences. As we will see in Sections 5 to 7, this is a moral problem in as much as it undermines the very fact of being a moral agent.

An upshot of uncovering the Moral Competence claim is that optimists and pessimists can be reconciled. Optimists, I will argue, share the same concern. Moreover, becoming clear on the Moral Competence claim shows that, while pessimists do not make a claim about the lesser value of moral knowledge, they do want to shift our attention toward other aspects of our epistemic moral life. Their discussion of moral understanding shifts the focus away from moral knowledge gain and toward the *abilities* at play in forming moral beliefs and in gaining moral knowledge. The distinction between shifting the focus away from moral knowledge and arguing for the lesser worth of moral knowledge should allow for a second reconciliation, that between reductionists and nonreductionists about moral understanding. To argue for the Moral Competence claim and for the two reconciliations, I first present the reductionist account of moral understanding in Section 4. Presenting this account allows us to better appreciate the epistemic debate that emerged following the pessimists' claim that moral understanding is more valuable than moral knowledge.

4. The debate about the nature of moral understanding

There is a debate between those who believe that there is a moral epistemic good more complex than and different in role from propositional moral knowledge and those who deny the singularity of this alleged epistemic good. The former—nonreductionists—claim that moral understanding differs from moral knowledge in a number of ways. They are nonreductionists because they claim that instances of moral understanding are different in nature and in role from instances of propositional moral knowledge. The latter, who deny this claim (e.g. Riaz 2015; Sliwa 2017) argue that a form of knowledge is necessary to understand: "knowledge is all there is to understanding; there is no need to stipulate a novel cognitive state that goes over and beyond knowledge" (Sliwa 2017, 526). They are reductionists about moral understanding.

I argue that this debate can be dissolved. Indeed, the opponents share deeper concerns, on the grounds of which their superficial divergences can be reconciled. To see this, we need to consider the motivations behind the dispute. The debate about the nature of moral understanding is not a mere dispute about the nature of epistemic states, but a vindication to reestablish the status of moral knowledge. Recall, from the previous section, the pessimists' claim about the importance of moral understanding in moral epistemology. The debate about the nature of moral understanding, that is, can be traced back to pessimists' concerns and to the debate between pessimists and optimists about moral testimony. In this section, I bring forward the relation between both debates to lay the grounds for the reconciliation. First, I present the reductionist position.

To defend their view, reductionists need to show that nothing in particular differentiates understanding from knowledge. To do this, they can argue, contra nonreductionists, that moral understanding and moral knowledge are the same mental states or that they involve the same psychological states or that they involve similar epistemic abilities.

To argue that nothing particular differentiates understanding from knowledge, Amber Riaz (2015) claims that, contrary to the claims of nonreductionists, there is no particular psychological state (grasping) that is unique to understanding (including moral understanding).[21] According to Riaz, once the idea of grasping is properly demystified, we will

[21] Riaz also develops a second argument in favor of her reductionist view: that understanding, like knowledge, is also vulnerable to some forms of luck—veritic luck. She says that cases of luck are Hills's primary motivation to reject the claim that understanding is reducible to knowledge. But actually, Hills's main motivation to accept that there is a difference between the way luck relates to understanding in comparison to knowledge, is that understanding aims at grasping—grasping is what is necessary to understand and it is immune to luck. Hence, rather than discuss Riaz's discussion on luck, I go straight to her rejection that what is particular to moral understanding (or understanding) is a form of grasping.

see that it is about degrees of informativeness. Riaz argues that understanding why p is wrong amounts to knowing why p is wrong (e.g. understanding why stealing is wrong amounts to knowing why stealing is wrong). Moral understanding is, according to this account, a species of moral knowledge. Riaz claims that moral understanding is reducible to knowing why, where knowing why amounts to "knowing that (P because Q)" (Riaz 2015, 113). One's propositional knowledge can increase in complexity according to the context: knowing that for some q and r that p because (q and ((p because q) because r)))—"understanding why P requires not just knowing the reason but knowing why it is a reason" (Riaz 2015, 114). Her point is that one can believe a smaller or a larger number of propositions about a given question. Moreover, the person who believes many more propositions grasps that question better. If grasping entails believing, then no further epistemic good (like understanding) is needed to account for the fact that one can be in a better (i.e. more complex or deepened) epistemic position than someone else. Hence, according to Riaz, there is nothing more to moral understanding than knowing a large enough number of moral propositions. One's moral epistemic standing improves when one forms new moral beliefs and acquires new moral knowledge.

To defend another form of reductionism, Pauline Sliwa (2017) argues that moral understanding is a form of knowing right from wrong. According to this account, a moral agent has moral understanding (e.g. understands why an action is right) in virtue of having knowledge about why it is right. According to this reductionist view, "every instance of moral understanding is constituted by an instance of moral knowledge" (Sliwa 2017, 526). An important distinction Sliwa draws (to which I return in Section 5) is that between specific *achievements* of moral understanding and the *capacity* of moral understanding: "To credit someone with an instance of moral understanding is to say that they have achieved a particular mental state […] In contrast, to credit people with moral understanding simpliciter is to attribute to them a capacity" (Sliwa 2017, 524). Achieving an instance of moral understanding, if we accept this distinction, is not achieving knowledge (i.e. we credit S with an instance of moral understanding when S has gained knowledge). According to Sliwa, who makes a quantitative claim similar to that of Riaz, the notion of moral understanding specifies the fact that an agent has *more* knowledge than another: "An agent understands why p if and only if she has a sufficient amount of knowledge why p" (Sliwa 2017, 530). For instance, whether Jones understands why p depends not just on whether he knows why p, but on how much he knows. Thus, according to this account, one who has moral understanding has more knowledge why than one who does not understand. Moreover, on the basis of the distinction she draws between achievements and capacity, Sliwa suggests that moral understanding is the capacity

of acquiring moral knowledge: an agent has the capacity of moral understanding if and only if (and to the degree to which) she has the ability to know right from wrong.

Now that we have a clearer idea of the reductionist position, recall that the debate between reductionists and nonreductionists about moral understanding is intertwined with the puzzle about moral testimony. As such, reductionists cannot simply deny nonreductionism, but must also address the asymmetry between the epistemology of moral beliefs and non-moral beliefs. As it turns out, reductionists are optimists with regard to moral testimony and they deny the asymmetry. Riaz, for instance, considers that relying on moral expertise is uncontroversial.[22] Sliwa denies the asymmetry between moral and non-moral beliefs and argues that what appears to be a puzzle can be dissipated once we recognize that moral understanding amounts to knowing right from wrong.

The central tension regards whether it is acceptable for mature moral agents to rely on moral testimony. There is, relatedly, disagreement regarding the primary epistemic goal of moral agents. Reductionists generally defend a form of optimism about moral testimony. I call a defender of this view a *reductionist optimist* (hereafter RO). Nonreductionists defend a form of pessimism. I call a defender of this view a *nonreductionist pessimist* (hereafter NRP). NRP holds that mature moral agents should not rely on others to form their moral beliefs, even if these others are reliable and trustworthy, even if it would provide them with moral knowledge. They have stronger reasons to gain moral understanding. Moral understanding is not transmissible via moral testimony. RO holds that there is nothing puzzling about relying on trustworthy others to form our moral beliefs, even as a mature moral agent. We sometimes even have good reasons to do so. Moreover, RO argues that moral understanding can be reduced to a form of moral knowledge. Considering that one can gain moral knowledge via moral testimony, the latter is not a problem. Their acknowledged agreements are that it is acceptable for children to rely on testimony to form their moral beliefs and that asking for moral advice is generally acceptable.

I will argue that RO and NRP can be reconciled. They only *appear* to disagree about the aforementioned points. If the reconciliation succeeds, we will see that they agree on the nature of moral understanding, on the importance that moral agents develop and exercise moral understanding, and on the value of moral testimony. This reconciliation occurs in three steps. First, I argue in Section 5 that RO and NRP agree that moral understanding is an epistemic competence and not an epistemic achievement. Moral understanding is a competence necessary

[22] See her discussion on understanding why and expertise (Riaz 2015, 125–26).

for competent moral agency. Second, I argue in Section 6 that they both accept the Moral Competence claim. That is, they agree that moral agents should be able to form their moral beliefs on their own and should do so. They also agree that the asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation lies in the fact that we should not outsource the formation of moral beliefs, whereas we can often outsource the formation of non-moral beliefs. Moreover, they can be reconciled on the value of moral testimony because the Moral Competence claim is compatible with the optimists' claim that mature moral agents sometimes have good reasons to rely on moral testimony. Then, as a third and final reconciliatory step, I argue in Section 7 that they both accept that the forms of moral testimony that foster moral understanding are desirable and can be relied on, and that we have good reasons to be pessimistic about practices of deference that undermine moral understanding.

5. First reconciliation: moral understanding is a moral epistemic competence

Moral understanding is an epistemic competence and not an achievement. This competence is necessary for competent moral agency. RO and NRP agree about this. This is the first reconciliation. To argue for this reconciliation, we need a clearer idea of what *moral competence* means.

One is competent if and only if one has the ability or abilities to do something successfully.[23] Similarly, to define moral competence, I rely on the intuition that a moral agent is competent if and only if she has the ability or abilities to do something successfully. We might think that a competent moral agent is able to act well or to do the right thing. However, the present discussion seeks to broaden the scope of what we expect a competent moral agent to be able to do. The ability or abilities targeted by the idea of moral understanding are epistemic—a moral agent's *moral epistemic competence* supposes that she can successfully do something in relation to the moral epistemic realm. I am assuming here that what is epistemic does not limit itself to gaining knowledge. It is distinctly moral in as much as it pertains to the moral sphere (i.e. it does not pertain to considerations of health, cooking, physics, chemistry, accounting, metaphysics, and so on). We can compare this to the competence to cook. One is a competent cook if and only if one is able to successfully do certain things. For instance, we might expect a competent cook to be able to cook *al dente* pasta, to grill bread without burning it, to be able to make a decent tomato sauce, and so on. Without some basics, we consider one to be an *incompetent* cook (i.e. one is not able to cook). Above some basics (e.g. when one can

[23] I stipulate this formulation based on common definitions of competence (e.g. Oxford Lexico 2021).

bake macaroons) we take this person to be skilled, perhaps even to be an expert cook. Hence, this is what I mean by the idea of competence. I do not develop in this chapter the particular abilities which we can expect a competent moral agent to display. This will be addressed in the following chapters.

The first reconciliation is possible if RO and NRP can agree that moral understanding is a moral epistemic competence and not an epistemic achievement.[24] They do agree, I contend, but this agreement goes unnoticed because we take them to disagree with regard to the nature of a moral epistemic *achievement*. RO holds that, for instance, Jessie *knows why* eating meat is wrong. NRP holds that, for instance, Jessie *understands why* eating meat is wrong. What is Jessie's epistemic standing with regard to the proposition "eating meat is wrong"? If she understands why this proposition is true, does this differ substantially from her knowing why it is true? And if yes, why?

According to reductionists like Riaz, propositional understanding is not different from propositional knowledge: it is knowing that p because q (and q because r and so on). Recall from Section 4 that, according to Riaz, if Jessie understands why eating meat is wrong, this means nothing other than that Jessie knows why eating meat is wrong. When Jessie understands why eating meat is wrong she achieves knowledge.

Contra reductionists, Hills argues that knowing is not necessary to understand. Recall that, according to Hills, having moral understanding is grasping the reasons why a moral proposition is true. Moreover, this demands more than forming a belief about those reasons. As we saw in Section 3, the best way to account for what it means to grasp is to say that one has certain abilities with regard to the subject one grasps.

Understanding, unlike knowing, is successful when one *grasps* why p is true as opposed to when one merely believes that p is true because q. Grasping, according to Hills and unlike what Riaz defends, implies something more than believing: "Understanding why p […] requires more than the correct belief that p because q. It requires a grasp of the reason why p, or more precisely, a grasp of the relation between p and q" (Hills 2016, 663). Grasping can be achieved when one forms true beliefs and does not require one to gain knowledge. Hills, to support this claim, gives the example of a person who forms true beliefs out of luck, but

[24] I rely on the assumption that the difference between competence and achievements is intuitive and that it is supported by the distinctions already drawn out within the debate between reductionists and non-reductionists about moral understanding. For further literature on the nature and value of achievements, see Bradford 2015. This analysis is of achievement in general. Virtue epistemologists, especially reliabilist virtue epistemologists, like Ernest Sosa (1980), claim that knowledge is a kind of achievement explained by a competence to believe truly. For a more general discussion on the role of competence in epistemology, see Sosa 2010.

nevertheless understands why a proposition is true. A person can understand, for instance, the reasons why Napoleon was a great general because he was "well-organized, tactically astute and ruthless" (Hills 2016, 672), while not knowing the information. The person would not have knowledge if she got the information from a textbook that only happens to be correct. Importantly, even if one only has true beliefs, one can draw the correct conclusion that, because of these qualities, Napoleon was a great general.[25] Thus, according to Hills, one can achieve an instance of understanding why without knowing why (or knowing that p because q). In this example, one's beliefs about what qualities make for a good general and one's ability to draw connections between these beliefs and between these beliefs and new information (e.g. "These are the qualities of a good general" and "Napoleon has these qualities") are what matters to understand because they enable one to draw the right conclusion. One understands because one is *able* to draw this conclusion and *draws* it.

What differentiates one who understands from one who does not is not a difference in the mental states they achieve; it is a difference in what they can do. To better appreciate this difference, let us compare Eleanor who does not understand why it is wrong to eat meat, with Jessie who understands why it is wrong to eat meat. Eleanor knows that eating meat is wrong on the basis of Jessie's reliable testimony. Moreover, following Jessie's explanations Eleanor forms additional beliefs about the reasons why eating meat is wrong. Does she still not understand? If yes, what is the relevant difference between Jessie and Eleanor? Both Jessie and Eleanor know that eating meat is wrong and they both know why it is so. The difference is what Jessie *can do* in contrast to Eleanor. Hills would say that Jessie understands why eating meat is wrong, as opposed to Eleanor, because she has *cognitive control* over the proposition. One has cognitive control over a proposition when one has a set of cognitive abilities whereby one can, as Hills says, "manipulate"[26] the proposition (e.g. relate it to other propositions, place it in other (or new) contexts, draw conclusions that p, explain that p and so on).[27] However, knowing why p does not require cognitive control: "in order to satisfy its role, understanding

[25] Jonathan Kvanvig, in *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (2003, 197–98), makes a similar point with a different example (the Comanche dominance of the North American southern plains).
[26] Hills (2016) compares grasping a proposition—being able to manipulate it—to grasping a physical object (e.g. a ball) and being able to manipulate it: one can roll it, throw and catch it, dribble with it, etc. Similarly, grasping a proposition implies being able to manipulate it with cognitive abilities.
[27] These are examples of the kind of things one can do when one can manipulate a proposition. It is not exhaustive. In Chapter 2, I present in more detail the kind of abilities which Hills argues characterize cognitive control.

why p requires cognitive control, but this is not essential to the epistemic role of knowledge why p" (Hills 2016, 669).[28]

Cognitive control is key to account for the difference between moral understanding and moral knowledge. We can then say that NRP are nonreductionists about what a moral agent should be able to do. That is, they are nonreductionists about a competence. Moral understanding is an epistemic competence whereby one can do certain things successfully, like form moral beliefs and gain moral knowledge. A competent baker has the ability to successfully bake a chocolate soufflé. His competence is baking, and his achievement is the chocolate soufflé. Similarly, Jessie is a competent moral agent because she has moral understanding. Moral understanding is her moral epistemic competence. Her achievement is forming the belief that eating meat is wrong. Can one be nonreductionist about a competence? What would that mean?

A competence cannot be reduced, but it can be *outsourced* (e.g. One does not bake bread oneself, but buys it at the bakery). One outsources the competence to directly access the achievement. NRP contend that one should not outsource one's competence to form moral beliefs, to draw moral conclusions, to gain moral knowledge, and so on. The assumption, in the comparison between Jessie and Eleanor, is that Eleanor has the competence (recall the example in Section 1) but does not exercise it. She, so to speak, buys her bread directly from Jessie. NRP argue that she should not do so.

Does this place RO and NRP in an irremediable disagreement? It does not. RO press differences between moral epistemic standings. A moral agent, they say, has a better moral epistemic standing (moral understanding) when she has *enough* moral knowledge. As such, they seem to embrace similar concerns to those of the pessimists. This is acknowledged in Sliwa's distinction between achievements of moral understanding and the capacity of moral understanding (see Section 4): one needs to be *able* to gain more moral knowledge. If, as RO claim, having moral understanding does not mean having achieved a single instance of moral knowledge, but having enough moral knowledge (e.g. grasping better) or being able to gain

[28] Hills (2016, 669–71) recognizes that a very demanding account of knowledge could presuppose that one needs some cognitive control to know. For instance, it would be required, for one to know why p is right, not only to be able to explain why p is right, but also to be able to explain why p' is right—that is, to explain why a slightly different, although related case, is right. However, Hills says that we can reject the idea that knowing requires some cognitive control for two reasons. The first is that what one is needing to explain why p' is additional knowledge, but one rightly knows why p—one does not need to know why p' in order to know why p. Moreover, a very demanding account of knowledge that would require cognitive control—the cognitive abilities to manipulate the proposition—would make knowledge so demanding that it could no longer play its central and common social epistemic role—that of exchanging knowledge through testimony.

new moral knowledge (e.g. having the capacity to know right from wrong), then moral understanding is just as engaging for the agent for RO as it is for NRP: it demands that she exercise cognitive abilities (i.e. to do something herself). It is a competence.

Reconciliation about the fact that moral understanding is a competence implies that NRP agree to reduce achievements of moral understanding to forms of propositional moral knowledge. Is this a fair concession? Those who argue, like Hills, that propositional knowledge is not necessary to achieve an instance of understanding might object. That is at the heart of the disagreement between reductionists and nonreductionists. Does it threaten what I want to convey here? It does not. Even if Hills is right to say that knowledge is not necessary to understand (which is disputed precisely by her reductionist opponents[29]), understanding nevertheless involves the achievement of a propositional state: a true belief about the reasons why (e.g. a true belief that Napoleon was a great general because he was well-organized, tactically astute, and ruthless). Importantly, this epistemic achievement is not the mark of moral understanding. What distinguishes one who understands p from one who does not, is that one who understands has formed this true belief on the basis of one's cognitive abilities—one's cognitive control over that proposition which gives one the ability to relate a number of beliefs together (e.g. relating the beliefs that Napoleon was well-organized, tactically astute, and ruthless *and* the belief that these are key qualities for a general).

Hence, despite controversy around the nature of moral understanding, there is convergence on the fact that a moral agent who has moral understanding stands in a better moral epistemic position than one who does not have (or has too low) moral understanding. One who has better moral understanding than someone else is more competent—that is, they are better at doing the things characteristic of this competence. Moral understanding is a moral epistemic competence whereby a moral agent has the ability to do something successfully. For

[29] Sliwa (2017) compares the formation of a belief by exercising (moral) understanding to the formation of a belief about visual properties. Like Jessie who might form the belief that there is a red apple on the table on the basis of visual perception, one can form the belief that Napoleon was a good general on the basis on one's epistemic competence—moral understanding. Sliwa's point with this example is that exercising one's visual perception does not guarantee that one sees that a red apple is on the table—what one sees might be an apple-shaped box. This is where the argument becomes intricate: if Hills holds on to the fact that understanding why is the achievement of a mental state that is different from belief or knowledge, it is hard to understand what the nature of this mental state is. In this case, we might side with reductionists who claim that what one achieves with one's understanding is knowledge (or true belief). What remains important is that it is the exercise of a competence which enabled these mental states—but there is no guarantee, like in the visual case, that by exercising one's competence, one achieves true belief or knowledge. Considering moral understanding's relation to the puzzle about moral testimony, I take Hills's central point to be that it is important for an agent to develop and exercise one's moral understanding, the same way that one could say that it is important for one to develop and exercise one's visual perception and not let others see for us.

the remainder of this chapter, I use "moral understanding" and "moral epistemic competence" interchangeably.

Is moral understanding more valuable than moral knowledge? We might conclude, following the above discussion, that the answer is no. More importantly, I do not believe that this is the right question to ask. A terminological issue creates confusion between what are moral epistemic achievements and what is a moral epistemic competence. Naming the moral epistemic competence "moral knowledge" creates a false opposition between moral knowledge and moral understanding because it blurs the distinction between achievements of propositional moral knowledge and the competence to reach such achievements. The question whether moral understanding is reducible to moral knowledge is barren if it is not appropriately situated within the context in which the idea of moral understanding arises: to explain the asymmetry between moral belief and non-moral belief formation. The claim that we have stronger reasons to gain moral understanding than to gain moral knowledge is misleading because it creates a false opposition between two moral epistemic achievements, whereas we are discussing here an achievement and a competence. Let me illustrate this false opposition with a simpler example. If one claims that we have stronger reasons to visit Rome than to visit Milan, then one makes a claim about the value of visiting different cities: one claims that it is better to visit Rome. This is what reductionists and nonreductionists take themselves to be debating. However, it is a false opposition because the question is not whether one should visit Rome rather than Milan, but rather how one should find one's way to Rome. The question is about the way one should form one's moral beliefs and gain moral knowledge. It is not whether one should gain moral knowledge at all.

The epistemic good introduced to explain away the puzzle about moral testimony is not an epistemic achievement—it is not true belief or knowledge—but a moral epistemic competence that can enable such achievements. For reconciliation, it is sufficient to show that both parties of the debate can accept that moral knowledge and moral understanding are different in nature. There is no hierarchy between these moral epistemic goods because one can enable the achievement of the other. There is a hierarchy, however, between ways in which a moral agent comes to the achievement. And, precisely, we have yet to see whether RO and NRP can be reconciled regarding the role that testimony can reasonably play in enabling one to form one's moral beliefs and achieve moral knowledge. We are brought back to their disagreement about the acceptability of relying on moral testimony.

6. Second reconciliation: one's moral understanding should not be outsourced

Two steps are needed to reach reconciliation about whether a mature moral agent should rely on moral testimony. The first step is to reconcile RO and NRP with respect to the Moral Competence claim. I do this in the present section. The second step is to reconcile RO and NRP with respect to the forms of moral testimony that are acceptable or unacceptable to rely on. I do this in Section 7.

I take NRP to make a claim about what a competent moral agent is expected to be able to do (see Section 3). This is the Moral Competence claim. This claim defends two ideas. First, that moral agents should be able to form their moral beliefs on their own *and* should do so. Being able to form one's moral beliefs presupposes that one has moral understanding. This is why the Moral Competence claim says that one should develop moral understanding. However, there might be cases where one, despite having moral understanding, does not exercise it. The Moral Competence claim says that mature moral agents should not just develop, but exercise their moral understanding. Second, the Moral Competence claim contends that the asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation lies in the fact that moral beliefs should be formed by exercising one's own epistemic faculties. Moral agents should not, in other words, outsource the formation of their moral beliefs to others. In contrast, we can often outsource the formation of non-moral beliefs to others.

RO, I will argue, accepts the Moral Competence claim. However, for full reconciliation to obtain, agreement needs to be reached about the pessimists' claim that relying on moral testimony threatens the development and exercise of moral understanding *and* about the optimists' claim that mature moral agents are *sometimes* justified in relying on the word of others. To find such agreement, we first need to make clear why cases like Eleanor are problematic. This will further clarify the asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation. Both RO and NRP agree with this asymmetry.

Optimists see no problem with cases like Eleanor's. On the contrary, Eleanor thereby gains moral knowledge. Is this not the goal? Pessimists answer that this is not the goal. The goal is to gain moral understanding. This being said, another argumentative move that pessimists can make, rather than deny that the goal is to gain moral knowledge, is to question whether optimists really support cases like Eleanor. This is the option I explore here. I argue that optimists are actually just as uneasy with cases like Eleanor's as pessimists are.

To accept that optimists are just as uneasy as pessimists with cases like Eleanor's, let us first compare the Eleanor example to two paradigmatic optimistic examples. First, let us consider in more detail the example of Peter, as introduced in Section 2:

> Peter lives in a cooperative house. This cooperative has an especially stringent process to welcome new members. They go through long interviews and only accept a new person once the whole group is unanimous in its decision. Many times, some members of the group have rejected candidates based on their sexist behavior. However, in these cases Peter was unable, even after lengthy discussion, to notice such sexism. The members of the cooperative rejecting the candidates based on sexism are all women. After some time, Peter decides to leave the cooperative because he feels that, since he cannot identify the cases of sexism himself, he cannot endorse the decisions of the group. Although the women in the group suggest to Peter that he should trust them about these cases, that they know about this, Peter feels that such deference would involve an abdication of his moral responsibility.[30]

Optimists argue that Peter has good reasons to trust his roommates. Can pessimists agree? Pessimists should agree on their own terms. First, because, thanks to this deference, Peter can know which candidates are sexist. He thereby gains important moral information. This does not yet meet the pessimists' demands. Here is the pivotal question: is Peter's moral responsibility jeopardized in such cases, as he thinks it is? Is Peter, in other words, outsourcing his moral epistemic competence when he relies on his roommates? No. Peter's reliance on his female roommates—even if it is recurrent—does not compromise his moral responsibility: Peter remains a responsibly engaged moral agent who can exercise his moral understanding as he endorses the decisions of the group.

To see that NRP can join RO in encouraging Peter to rely on others to form his moral belief, we need to compare the belief that Peter forms to the belief that Eleanor and Sarah form. On the basis of moral testimony:

Eleanor forms the belief that *eating meat is wrong*.

Sarah forms the belief that *she should not lie*.

Peter forms the belief that *this candidate's behavior is sexist*.

To better illustrate the implications of these three examples, I need to introduce a second example:

> Anna: Anna is a journalist who is preparing to go on a reporting trip to a dangerous and conflict-ridden area. She has to tell her family that she will be away, but she really

[30] This a shortened version of the Peter example in Karen Jones's article "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge" (see Jones 1999).

> doesn't know what to tell them. If she tells them where exactly she's going and why, they will be extremely worried. On the other hand, she worries that by evading the question she would be lying. She goes back and forth but cannot decide what the right thing to do is and eventually decides to ask a friend whose judgment she trusts. (Sliwa 2012, 178)

Anna asks a friend whether evading the question would amount to lying. On the basis of moral testimony:

Anna forms the belief that *this is not a lie / this is a lie*.

There is a significant difference between the kind of moral belief that Peter and Anna form and the kind that Eleanor and Sarah form. On the one hand, the moral beliefs formed by Eleanor and Sarah *halt* the process of their moral reflection: they accept the moral information and do not think further about the question. Eleanor's case is puzzling because, as a mature moral agent, she just accepts moral information that has a direct bearing on her actions without further engaging with the question. We expect a mature moral agent to engage with an ethical question by discussing and questioning, rather than just accepting moral information: "Why is eating meat wrong? OK, I had no idea about the conditions of factory farming. What about health reasons, don't I need protein? […] Oh, I did not realize how viable a plant-based diet is. OK, then what about…," and so on. Jessie, who understands this moral problem, can engage with this moral question. She can, for instance, exchange reasons, consider a different position from her own, integrate novel moral experience into her current understanding, ask others for advice, review her position, provide advice, agree to disagree in cases of reasonable disagreement, and so on. A number of abilities that Eleanor, even if she possesses them, does not exercise.

The problem is that Eleanor's reliance on others to form beliefs about what she should do speaks ill of her competence as a moral agent. Whereas this is not the case for Peter and Anna. Although Peter forms a moral belief on the basis of moral testimony, he still engages with the moral question. Peter relies on testimony to know that a particular behavior is sexist, but not to know that sexism is wrong. Nor does he rely on others to know what he should do when faced with sexism. Peter understands why sexism is wrong and he *actively seeks* to understand why some candidates are sexist during the interviews. The difficulties he faces do not reveal poor moral competence, but the difficulty of recognizing key situational features that do not speak to one's experience. It is morally worthy of Peter to seek to understand why these particular cases instantiate the properties to which his female roommates are sensitive. It would have been better, as far as good moral agency goes, had he had the patience to learn from the experience of his female roommates—as opposed to becoming frustrated and leaving.

Similarly, Anna grasps important moral considerations. She believes that she does not want to hurt her family by causing them to worry and she wants to be honest with them. She relies on her trustworthy friend to figure out whether a particular instance amounts to lying. This does not prevent her from exercising her moral understanding. On the contrary, Anna appreciates what is at stake in the situation *and* is actively seeking what to do. Given that optimists generally support cases of moral testimony like those of Peter and Anna, it seems fair to say that they also find the Eleanor case problematic.

Optimists and pessimists both accept that young Sarah needs to rely on her parents. However, this reliance should not prevent Sarah from learning how to engage with a moral question. We might accept that five-year-old Sarah can rely on the word of her parents, but what about 16-year-old Sarah? Shouldn't she learn why lying is wrong, why helping those in need is right, why she should be honest? Learn—that is, come to understand—why certain situations, actions or attitudes are right or wrong; and moreover, understand the role that these normative claims play in guiding how she lives. Deference to her parents should be conducted such that she can also develop the ability to reflect on her moral experience, to ask questions, to compare cases, to explore the different possibilities of a moral situation, and so on. This is also something both RO and NRP can accept.

To see, in light of these examples, the convergence between RO and NRP, let us consider the following distinctions between three different ways of forming moral beliefs on the basis of moral testimony:

1. Reliance on another's word to form a belief about particular moral information (e.g. "This remark is sexist," "Evading the question would be lying") or morally relevant non-moral information (e.g. "Didn't you see that he looked at her with contempt?").

2. Reliance on another's word to form a belief about what is right or wrong (e.g. "Lying is wrong," "Eating meat is wrong," "Sexism is wrong").

3. Reliance on another's word to form a moral belief about what to do (including considerations about how to live generally) (e.g. "I should ϕ," "I should be a more considerate person," 'I should not allow sexism in our household," "I should not lie").

Peter and Anna rely on others to form the first kind of belief. Eleanor and Sarah rely on others to form the latter two kinds of beliefs. While beliefs in the first case provide information that helps the person think further about the question, they do not adjudicate the moral question. Beliefs in the second and third cases issue (directly or indirectly) a moral verdict about what to

do. Importantly, we assume that one can gain moral knowledge in all three cases, but that there is a significant difference between relying on others to form beliefs 1 in comparison to 2 and 3. The difference lies in the way these moral beliefs are tied to moral agency. The problem in the latter two cases is that through reliance one is *outsourcing* one's epistemic moral competence, thereby part of one's moral agency, to these trustworthy others.

Outsourcing one's moral agency is problematic. NRP's distrust of moral testimony stems from the concern that, in so deferring, a moral agent does not come to her own moral verdicts. A competent moral agent should be able to address moral questions; she should not constantly need a guide to do so. We might name this the "Do it yourself" clause. Heavily relying on a guide to address a moral question, when one has the epistemic resources to do it oneself, is not only substandard; it is an outright abdication of one's moral agency. In this regard, although it targets an epistemic competence, outsourcing one's moral epistemic competence is a moral problem, not an epistemic problem. Outsourcing one's moral understanding is a moral problem because it is constitutive of moral agency to be engaged at the epistemic level. One is active at the epistemic level, for instance, in the way one encounters and gathers information (moral and non-moral) about the world or in the way one attends to moral situations, or in the way one seeks to relate general moral principles to particular moral situations. They are epistemic activities that feed inputs into our general appraisal of a moral situation and are necessary steps in deciding what is to be done. When we ponder a moral question, we often doubt ourselves, inquire, debate, weigh reasons, go back and forth between options (What should I tell them? Who should we choose? Is this wrong? What should I do? Should I lie to protect her?). Eleanor abdicates this engagement by deferring to Jessie. NRP are pessimistic toward moral testimony because they are concerned that this aspect of moral agency is outsourced. The "Do it yourself" clause is about what a competent moral agent should do epistemically. Thus far, I have remained general with regard to the kind of epistemic engagement this supposes. I have relied on our intuition that one attends to moral situations, doubts, questions and so on, taking these as typical traits of inquiry. I will provide a more systematic account of this epistemic engagement in Chapters 3 and 4.

The "Do it yourself" clause is also supported by RO. This comes to light in Sliwa's claim that pessimists overestimate how easy it is to transmit knowledge (whether moral or non-moral) via testimony: "What I can come to know based on your testimony depends on many factors. It depends, in part, on my linguistic and conceptual resources. But it also depends on how much I already know about the subject matter at hand" (Sliwa 2017, 533). Why does Sliwa emphasize this point? If gaining knowledge by testimony is more epistemically demanding

than pessimists suppose, then insisting on the demandingness of gaining moral knowledge via moral testimony reveals that reductionists endorse the pessimists' worry that there is something which mature moral agents should be *able to do on their own*. If optimists argue that moral testimony is epistemically worthy, not only because one thereby gains knowledge, but because one thereby exercises cognitive abilities, then they converge, after all, with the worry raised by their opponents. If this is correct, then what are RO expressing optimism about? Importantly, is their optimism compatible with the concerns expressed by pessimists?

RO are optimists about cases of moral testimony that provide moral information necessary for a moral agent to form a moral belief that contributes to making an informed moral judgment (like in case 1 above). These beliefs play an important role within the upstream process of moral reflection. They are similar to—although often more controversial than—information like the weather, road directions or medical information (e.g. "to go to Rome from Florence follow highway E35" or "metronidazole can be used to treat bacterial infections"). Optimists defend the idea that moral agents should collaborate with their moral epistemic peers in forming those beliefs: "Often, we cannot do as well on our own as we could do if we accepted the moral testimony of others" (Jones 1999, 56). Optimists argue for a "Have the humility to ask for help" clause.[31] This clause offers some necessary nuance to the clause of pessimists, some of whom defend a *strict* "Do it yourself" clause. They contend that moral testimony is only appropriate for moral beginners who cannot evaluate moral situations themselves—although some strict pessimists might allow the occasional reliance on others in sensitive circumstances.[32] The strictest form of pessimism is the idea of a fully isolated moral agent who should critically reflect on the principles she adopts and figure out by herself what is right. Some have dubbed this agent "the ideal autonomous knower": "This ideal type relies on no one else for any of her knowledge. Thus she takes no one else's word for anything, but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative and inferential powers" (Fricker 2006, 226). A strict "Do it yourself" clause discourages any form of reliance on others past the stage of development.

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[31] Margaret Urban Walker (2007) although she does not participate in the debate between optimists and pessimists about moral testimony, nevertheless defends a view of moral understanding that makes points similar the one I argue optimists make regarding collaboration and humility. Walker argues for an expressive-collaborative view of moral understanding, where the persons engaged in this procedure, rather than seeking an arrangement which can further their interests, are "motivated by the aim of going on together, preserving or building self – and mutual understanding in moral terms." (71) An understanding, in other words, of how to build and preserve a moral community "where members [have] roughly or largely shared moral beliefs [and] try to refine understanding, extend consensus, and eliminate conflict among themselves", thus reaching "equilibrium between people as well as within them" (Ibib.).

[32] See Jones (1999) for a discussion of this pessimistic position.

My attempt at reconciliation here seeks to demonstrate that both clauses complement each other in guiding epistemic moral agency. Both RO and NRP accept, after all, that moral agents can, and sometimes need to, rely on advice to improve their moral wherewithal. Pessimists, in other words, already accept that we sometimes need the help of others to successfully address moral questions. There is no reason why, so long as it does not compromise one's moral understanding, pessimists should be against the optimists' clause. This is a point Hills, for instance, accepts:

> I do not mean to suggest here that moral thought has to take place in isolation. Thinking about moral questions with other people can be a way of coming to moral understanding. But if each individual is to have moral understanding each must grasp the connections between p and the reasons why p, even if they have acquired that grasp through collective deliberation. (Hills 2010, 193n9)

We are left with the question whether moral testimony compromises (or risks compromising) a moral agent's moral epistemic competence. Are pessimists justified in claiming that moral agents should not rely on others? To what extent can one reasonably rely on others to navigate ethical life?

7. Third reconciliation: what forms of moral testimony are acceptable?

The last reconciliation accommodates both NRP and RO clauses. On the one hand, we need to accommodate the fact that moral matters engage one's agency in such a way that one cannot just delegate confrontation with moral questions to others: the "Do it yourself" clause. On the other hand, we need to accommodate the fact that the ideal autonomous knower is illusory and that moral agents need to work with other members of the moral community to successfully address moral questions: the "Have the humility to ask for help" clause. Full reconciliation is possible if both clauses can be accommodated. To accommodate them, we need to distinguish between four different forms of moral testimony. These four forms reflect the different kinds of belief one can form on the basis of testimony, as we saw in Section 6: beliefs about particular moral information and practical beliefs. They also reflect how often reliance takes place: occasionally or as a practice. This gives us:

> Moral Testimony 1: Occasional moral deference to gain particular moral information.
> Moral Testimony 2: Reliance on moral testimony as a practice to gain particular moral information.

Moral Testimony 3: Occasional moral deference to know what to do.

Moral Testimony 4: Reliance on moral testimony as a practice to know what to do.

To reconcile RO and NRP, I need to show that they agree that Moral Testimony 1 is acceptable, that Moral Testimony 2 and 3 are acceptable only in a limited range of cases, and that Moral Testimony 4 should be avoided.

First, RO and NRP agree, as we saw in the previous section, that occasional moral deference to gain particular moral information (Moral Testimony 1) is acceptable. This is testimony to gain particular moral information like in case 1 above (e.g. to know that a comment is sexist). Optimists provide good reasons to motivate the idea that we sometimes gain in relying on others (see Section 2). In some cases, for instance, when the particular experience of another deserves deference, we even should defer. Moral Testimony 1 does not halt the process of moral reflection and thus does not prevent the development of moral understanding nor its exercise. This form of testimony is the least controversial.

Second, relying on moral testimony as a practice to gain particular moral information (Moral Testimony 2) is only a problem if it jeopardizes moral epistemic competence. What does a moral agent who constantly relies on others to find out particular moral information look like? It is a more common case than we might think. A moral agent could rely on others for specific moral information as a practice, if, despite her grasp of what is morally important, she does not have access to relevant moral information. She would not have access, for instance, because some morally relevant aspects of reality do not speak to her experience. It might be, for instance, very difficult for a male police officer to assess particular instances of sexual harassment: he has never been the victim of sexual harassment, he has never—he hopes—performed it himself and he knows that his outlook is pervaded by his society's long history of downplaying the seriousness and importance of this behavior. Although he understands that it is wrong, he really cannot spot an instance of sexual harassment. Therefore, he routinely defers to female colleagues and to the victims themselves to know that it is instantiated in particular circumstances.[33] This kind of testimony would be acceptable if it were limited to a narrow range of moral information. These would be cases where the agent does not outsource her moral understanding, but she recognizes her limits. Indeed, one does

[33] As Laurence Thomas (1993) notes, while not only women are victims of sexual harassment, this phenomenon is more common for them. Despite the seriousness of sexual harassment, perhaps not all victims, Thomas suggests, could helpfully guide someone like the good-willed, but lacking police officer. A form of good will, on the part of the victim, for instance, to truthfully convey her experience seems necessary for successful deference.

exercise one's moral understanding when one asks for help. We can compare this case with a form of know-how. If, for instance, a Swiss baker relies on an experienced Canadian colleague to know when maple water has boiled long enough to produce maple syrup—something that takes experience to recognize—then his reliance does not tamper with his competence as a baker. On the contrary, he is competent enough to know when he needs help.

Third, there might be cases when an otherwise competent moral agent finds herself helpless when faced with a particular moral question and defers to a trustworthy other to know what to do (Moral Testimony 3). I take these cases to be rare. Note that this case is different from the previous one. This is a case where a moral agent, being at a loss, defers to another to find out what to do, not only to gain particular information. It is unclear whether relying on others occasionally to know what to do is a form of outsourcing. As we saw in the previous section, the worry is that possibly competent moral agents outsource their moral understanding (thereby their agency) through moral testimony (or are prevented from even developing their moral understanding because of testimony). It seems that the occasionality, in cases like Moral Testimony 3, prevents moral understanding from being outsourced. We might say that the agent precisely recognizes, based on her moral understanding, occasional circumstances when she needs to defer. This might be a case, for instance, where a spouse becomes suddenly responsible for her partner after a serious car accident. The situation is urgent and the person needs to decide, while the other is unconscious, whether or not to operate. Of course, medical practitioners do not have the authority to decide, but we might think that the spouse, completely at a loss as to what to do, not only relies on the surgeon's advice to think further about the question and decide, but takes the advice to settle the decision. In these rare cases, it might be reasonable for the spouse to defer to the surgeon. This form of reliance on moral testimony, then, is acceptable and is not a case where one outsources one's moral epistemic competence.

The real culprit is reliance on moral testimony *as a practice* to know what to do (Moral Testimony 4). Relying on testimony as a practice means that it is something one does over and over again, not just on occasion, but as a means to navigate ethical life. This kind of moral testimony is a problem, first, because a child brought up under these conditions cannot develop what she needs to address moral questions herself—she cannot develop moral understanding. She is forever dependent on an authority to know what to do. It is also a problem, secondly, because a mature moral agent who defers to others as a practice to know what to do, even if she has developed the cognitive abilities to address moral questions, abdicates her moral agency. Unlike Moral Testimony 3, relying on testimony as a practice to know what to do is

a severe problem because one thereby outsources one's epistemic moral competence. Both RO and NRP agree, it seems fair to say, about the severity of this problem. The worry that someone completely outsources their epistemic moral competence by deferring to others to know what to do and thereby abdicates their moral agency might be named the worry of *discipleship*. Common cases of discipleship are adult devotees of cults, gurus or religious leaders who blindly follow the leaders' words about how to live. They obey that authority's word and ideas.

Discipleship is a problem, first, because of the possibility of abuses or deviations. Atrocities committed under obedience—what Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton (1989) have theorized as "crimes of obedience"[34]—are common in human history. Social influence—how a person's opinions and attitudes affect those of another—is also a well-documented phenomenon (Martin and Hewstone 2007), and so are its deviations and morally problematic impacts (Kelman and Hamilton 1989; Brief et al. 2000; Martin and Hewstone 2007; Russell 2011). Discipleship is problematic, secondly, for its implications for the subject herself. The question is not whether an authority is trustworthy. For instance, one might grow up in full deference to one's trustworthy parents or local pastor and succeed in fitting in with the moral community because this authority guides one well (e.g. knows what is fair, what is generous, etc.). Discipleship is a problem, even if the authority is trustworthy, because in relying on this authority one abdicates one's moral agency. Abdicating one's moral agency is not only infantilizing, but it deprives the dependent person of an essential aspect of human flourishing—of the very development of one's life. The possibility of writing one's own life story, as Margaret Urban Walker argues, is central to one's integrity. It involves, as she puts it metaphorically, knitting the development of one's actions along a thread that gives meaning to one's life. Moreover, it is a privilege one should not forgo. People who are subordinated or oppressed are in part considered wronged precisely because they are deprived of this integrity: deprived of a significant moral good, a source of self-respect and of other's admiration (Walker 2007, Chapter 5). Someone outsourcing her epistemic moral competence would also be deprived of such integrity.

One could object that discipleship has its purpose. For instance, that cases of deeply entrenched moral ignorance or cases of malevolence give good reasons to rely on the word of trustworthy others about what to do as a practice. In such cases, we might not want these

[34] They give, as an example of a crime of obedience, the 1968 Mỹ Lai massacre carried out under political and military authority.

people to exercise their moral epistemic competence. We might precisely doubt that they have such competence, and thus presume that they should follow the word of trustworthy others. The question whether discipleship is legitimate in cases where one's competence is jeopardized by other factors—deep ignorance, malevolence—is a different question from the one I address here. The problem of discipleship is that one *could* be epistemically morally competent but outsources that aspect of one's ethical life to others. Moreover, the very possibility that there can be defects of moral agency such that one would be justified in resorting to discipleship supports the idea that developing and exercising moral epistemic competence lies at the heart of what it is to be a competent moral agent and that merely gaining moral knowledge from others is insufficient.

I take pessimists to be worried about discipleship. The risk of discipleship is why they contend that it is unacceptable for mature moral agents to accept moral principles, form moral beliefs about what to do and beliefs about how to live on the back of others. The examples of Sarah and Eleanor are not yet cases of discipleship, but pessimists take seriously the threat that they might become so. When Eleanor relies on her friend, she does not exercise her moral epistemic competence. If such reliance is common practice for Eleanor, her ethical life is fully guided by another. This would be a case of discipleship because she would not form her own opinions, but instead follow the lead of another person—she would shape her life according to that other's moral outlook. What is more, Moral Testimony 4 threatens not only the "Do it yourself" clause, but also the "Have the humility to ask for help" clause. A competent moral agent comes to know what is right or wrong and decides what to do by herself. However, within this process, it is legitimate, sometimes even morally required, to rely on the epistemic help of others. Importantly, it is part of competent moral agency to recognize such moments. Precisely, one's humility cannot be exercised in cases of discipleship. Thus, both RO and NRP accept that cases like Moral Testimony 4 compromise a moral agent's moral epistemic competence.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide avenues of reconciliation between reductionists and nonreductionists about moral understanding. In light of this reconciliation, we were to gain clarity on the nature of this moral epistemic good. This reconciliation was only possible if we considered the debate about the nature of moral understanding in relation to the debate between optimists and pessimists about moral testimony. This allows for a single debate between reductionists about moral understanding who defend a form of optimism toward moral testimony and nonreductionists about moral understanding who defend a form of pessimism

toward moral testimony. I argued that the strong reasons pessimists insist that adult moral agents have not to rely on moral testimony are compatible with optimists' defense of moral testimony. I argued that nonreductionists-pessimists defend the Moral Competence Claim. This is the claim that mature moral agents should be able to form their moral beliefs on their own *and* should do so, and that the asymmetry between moral and non-moral belief formation consists in the fact that moral, as opposed to non-moral, beliefs should be formed on the basis of one's own epistemic abilities. Reductionists-optimists' intuitions, as I argued, support the Moral Competence claim. What they press moral agents to do, with their defense of moral testimony, is to have the humility to recognize their own limits and to dare to ask for the help of their moral epistemic peers as they go about finding their way through ethical life. My goal was also to uncover agreement about the fact that there are forms of moral testimony about which we have good reasons to be pessimists and forms of moral testimony on which we can, and sometimes should, rely because they engage our moral epistemic competence and provide information to which we would otherwise not have access. Most importantly, I wanted to reveal agreement on the idea that there is an epistemic competence necessary to competent moral agency—moral understanding. Jessie, Peter, and Anna are examples of moral agents with this competence. The limit of this reconciliation perhaps lies in the fact that nonreductionists-pessimists must concede that achievements of moral understanding are achievements of moral knowledge. This is a concession, I argued, that they should be willing to make on their own terms. The mark of moral understanding is that one *is able* to form true moral beliefs or gain moral knowledge on the basis of one's cognitive abilities; it is not the achievement itself.

Moral understanding is an epistemic competence necessary for competent moral agency. It is regulated by two clauses: *"Do it yourself"* and *"Have the humility to ask for help."* This reconciliation invites us to think about moral agency in relation to these two clauses: a moral agent is one who is engaged epistemically with humility. This competence is different from mental state achievements because it allows one to gain new mental states (i.e. form new true moral beliefs and gain moral knowledge) and to integrate those within one's web of understanding. The competence of moral understanding sits uneasily with moral testimony because a person who would rely solely on moral testimony to form her moral beliefs—or to shape her moral outlook more generally—can neither develop nor exercise it. A competence is something which is not transmissible, which one develops over time and exercises oneself. A discussion of the reasons why one should become a competent moral agent is beyond the scope of the present work. For most interested in better understanding the nature of moral agency, such skepticism is not a concern.

We needed this discussion to dissipate false oppositions maintained by the debate, oppositions that functioned to the detriment of our understanding of the relation between our epistemic life and our moral agency. The reconciliation should have relatedly dissipated the tension regarding the concurring values of moral understanding and moral knowledge. It is not that one is more valuable than the other, but that there is a preferred way of securing one's moral knowledge; to gain it on the basis of one's moral understanding. Reconciling the opposing sides in this debate uncovers the real questions we need to grapple with: what kind of competence is moral understanding? What can a moral agent with moral understanding successfully do? What abilities characterize this competence? The next two chapters are dedicated to answering these questions.

Chapter 2

Moral understanding is not an explanatory competence: limits of the Explanatory Account of moral understanding and the necessity to appreciate moral reasons

Introduction

Moral understanding is an epistemic competence and not an epistemic achievement, as I argued in the previous chapter. It is a competence necessary for competent moral agency that enables one, amongst other things, to successfully form moral beliefs and gain moral knowledge. Moral agents should not outsource this competence. Mature moral agents should have developed and should exercise their moral understanding: the *"Do it yourself"* clause. It is part of exercising their moral understanding to know when they need to rely on the help of others to gain moral information: the *"Have the humility to ask for help"* clause. Despite emphasizing that moral understanding is something one does oneself, I have yet to give a systematic account of the nature of this epistemic competence and the abilities characteristic of it. We now need such an account.

The goal of this chapter is to consider whether moral understanding is an *explanatory* competence, characterized by specific explanatory abilities, the view defended by the Explanatory Account of moral understanding. According to this account, one who has moral understanding can successfully explain why a moral proposition is true. I argue that the relevant explanatory abilities put forth by the Explanatory Account, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are neither sufficient nor necessary for one to have moral understanding. It is important to present the Explanatory Account of moral understanding because, although it has certain limits, it nevertheless allows us to garner important intuitions about the conditions that an account of moral understanding should be able to accommodate. An account of moral understanding should be able to accommodate the intuitions that having moral understanding implies something like a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do. After presenting the Explanatory Account, in Section 1, I shall argue, in Sections 2 and 3, that the relevant explanatory abilities are not sufficient to have moral understanding. According to the Insufficiency Objection, we can imagine a person who is proficient in all the

relevant explanatory abilities, while lacking a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do—two basic intuitions about what it means for one to have moral understanding. This person, I argue, identifies moral reasons, but does not appreciate them. This appreciation, I argue in Section 3.2, is the experience of the importance of moral considerations. This experience reveals normative character, thus allowing the subject to form a self-engaging practical belief about what she should do. Appreciating moral reasons is necessary, but not sufficient to have moral understanding. One might thus still consider that the relevant explanatory abilities, while insufficient, are necessary, in addition to appreciation, to have moral understanding. The Inarticulacy Objection, which I raise in Section 4, argues to the contrary. It seems unacceptable, that is, that a paradigmatically competent, but inarticulate, moral agent fails to qualify as having moral understanding because she cannot explain why what she does is right or wrong. This objection should show that the explanatory abilities, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are not necessary to have moral understanding.

Before presenting the Explanatory Account and the reasons why I think it does not capture the abilities characteristic of moral understanding, I should explain why I do not consider an alternative view. Moral understanding is the capacity to know right from wrong, according to the Moral Knowledge Account, defended by Paulina Sliwa (2017). This would be another candidate to account for the nature of this moral epistemic competence. I am sympathetic to this account, which raises similar objections to the ones I raise in this chapter. First is the criticism that explanatory abilities cannot account for the important role of first-person moral experience. Second is the objection that being articulate is not the same as having moral understanding. Our views about the nature of moral understanding converge in this respect. However, an account of moral understanding as the competence to know right from wrong fails to capture why certain forms of moral testimony are morally problematic. One's ability to know right from wrong—if this really is the final moral epistemic goal—could be that of reliably deferring to a trustworthy other (e.g. one's private moral guru). One would have to exercise the ability to find such a moral guru, but one could then outsource one's moral epistemic competence for good. Hence, I do not present the view because I have already provided the necessary criticism of it in the previous chapter. We need, as an account of moral understanding, an epistemic competence that cannot be outsourced and that can accommodate the epistemic engagement of the moral agent, even if she only succeeds in forming a true belief.

1. The Explanatory Account of moral understanding

Having moral understanding is *understanding why* a moral proposition is true, according to the popular account defended by Alison Hills (2009; 2010; 2011).[35] Hills claims, as we can recall from Chapter 1, that moral understanding is an epistemic good whereby an agent *grasps* the coherence of the relations between beliefs: "Moral understanding requires a grasp of the reasons why some action is right […]" (Hills 2011, 256). The idea of grasping is central to differentiate one who understands p from one who knows p. One who grasps, as opposed to one who only knows, is able to do something successfully. Recall that according to Hills, grasping a moral proposition is having *cognitive control* over that proposition—being able, that is, to manipulate this moral proposition. What abilities are supposed in manipulating a moral proposition? A person can manipulate a moral proposition when she has a number of intellectual abilities. Specifically, a moral agent who has moral understanding can successfully do the following:

i. follow an explanation of why p given by someone else,
ii. explain why p in her 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 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'.

These six intellectual abilities are necessary, according to this account, to have moral understanding. Let us call this the Explanatory Account of Moral Understanding (hereafter *the Explanatory Account*).

According to the Explanatory Account, understanding the reasons why a moral proposition is true (e.g. understanding why it is right to help one in need) is an achievement that displays the competence to form beliefs about the reasons why a moral proposition is true and to manipulate the proposition through the six explanatory abilities. One can have various

[35] Hills presupposes that moral understanding is a form of interrogative understanding: understanding why something is the case. Other forms of interrogative understanding are "understanding how x" (e.g. understanding how something came about); "understanding what" (e.g. understanding what somebody said); "understanding how something is of a certain quality" (e.g. understanding how it feels to be soaked after walking through rain). Forms of interrogative understanding are generally distinguished from forms of objectual understanding and propositional understanding. On the different forms of understanding, see Kvanvig 2003, Chapter 8, and Baumberger, Beisbart and Brun 2016.

degrees of competence. The relevant intellectual abilities develop through *practice*, similar to how one develops a practical skill (see Hills 2009, 119). It is sufficient, then, that one at first correctly believes that q is why p and can follow an explanation of why p given by someone else. One's moral understanding can then improve as the other abilities develop. Having moral understanding, in other words, does not demand that one develops and exercises the six explanatory abilities to their greatest extent. Moreover, one who understands why a moral proposition is true forms one's belief about the truth of this proposition on the reasons why it is true. This person, as discussed in the previous chapter, is in a better epistemic position than someone who relies on another's word to form their beliefs.[36] To illustrate the difference between one who has moral understanding and one who does not, we can compare the example of Mary, to that of Sarah, which we can recall from Chapter 1:

> Mary: Mary believes that she has moral reasons not to lie because lying to others fails to respect them and in the long run tends to make them unhappy. She can see that there are differences between lying and not telling the whole truth. She thinks that lying for your own benefit is normally wrong, but it is harder to say whether lying to someone in a way that makes her happy is ever acceptable, and this may depend on the exact circumstances of the case. She can apply these beliefs to new situations and judge which action is morally right. (Hills 2009, 98–99)

> Sarah: Sarah is five years old. Her parents have told her not to lie, that lying is naughty and wrong. She accepts what they say. (Hills 2009, 98)

Mary and Sarah both believe that lying is wrong, but only Mary has moral understanding. The difference between them is that Mary has developed and exercises (to varying degrees) the six relevant explanatory abilities. Mary thus forms her moral belief herself, whereas Sarah relies on the word of her parents to form her belief. Mary does not simply hold a belief about the particular worth of the practice of lying, but she can relate beliefs about dishonesty and truthfulness to her broader web of moral beliefs, moral knowledge, and more general understanding of morality. Mary can see nuances between different moral situations, she can identify the wrongness-making features of the different situations, she can explain why most lies are wrong, but that there are exceptions. Moreover, she can apply her beliefs about the wrongness of lying to new situations and she can form her own judgment about new, but similar cases, and so on. Sarah, at her young age, accepts what her parents say, because she cannot

[36] However, as we can recall from Chapter 1, some forms of moral testimony are helpful, even at times necessary, in improving a moral agent's epistemic standing, as in cases where this testimony comes from a privileged epistemic standpoint.

follow an explanation regarding the reasons why lying is wrong, nor can she draw distinctions between different situations, and so on.[37]

The Explanatory Account assumes that the best way to account for what it means to grasp the coherence of the relations between a number of items is to have the ability to explain these relations. This is supported by contemporary defenders of understanding more generally.[38] Epistemologists who defend the view that there is an intimate relation between explanation and understanding claim, for instance, that "explanation is what is needed to defend a claim to understand" (Zagzebski 2001, 237), that the role of understanding is making sense of explanation (Grimm 2010) or again that a condition for one's understanding of a subject by means of a theory is that one can give an explanation of that subject with the help of the theory (Baumberger and Brun 2016).[39] Explanatory abilities also seem necessary to account for understanding how something came to be the case (e.g. Paula understands how Martha broke her arm because she can explain it to Timmy). Moreover, according to Linda Zagzebski, another point that favors accepting the intimate relation between understanding and explanation is that it captures a social aspect of our epistemic practices (see Zagzebski 2001, 238). Lastly, analyzing the idea of grasping through an agent's ability to explain seems to be the best way to prevent circling the notion of grasping back to understanding.[40] Hence there appear to be strong reasons to account for understanding in terms of explanatory abilities.

I will argue that explanatory abilities are not essential to moral understanding, despite their value. The Explanatory Account captures important abilities that it would be beneficial for a moral agent to have. Abilities to explain one's moral position, for instance, play an important social role (e.g. to teach, to exchange reasons, to discuss an ethical question). However, if we accept, as I defended in Chapter 1, that moral understanding is an epistemic competence necessary to competent moral agency, then the abilities characteristic of this competence cannot be those of giving explanations. Note that it is likely that one, as a result of having moral understanding, develops and exercises the relevant explanatory abilities; yet, as

[37] Notice that in this example, Sarah's parents do not help her develop her understanding. They do not explain to her, that is, why lying is wrong, they just state that it is. Ideally, a child would be given the chance to understand why something is right or wrong, either through explanation or example, and not just be told that it is so.
[38] Kvanvig says that this idea dates back to Plato and how he presents the notion of *episteme* in the Theaetetus (Kvanvig 2003, 193).
[39] While these authors take explanation to be the condition for one to grasp a theory, that is, a condition for objectual understanding as opposed to interrogative understanding, they share the assumption that understanding is tied to explanation.
[40] About the difficulty of defining grasping non-circularly, see for instance Baumberger, Beisbart, and Brun 2016, 9–15 and Kvanvig 2003, 192.

I will argue, these abilities are neither sufficient nor necessary for one to have moral understanding.

The difficulty, to defend this claim, is to navigate between the claims of the Explanatory Account that I believe we have reason to preserve and those I believe we need to disregard. Defenders of the Explanatory Account are right that Mary, given her moral understanding, has good moral epistemic wherewithal. Mary, that is, can rely on her moral understanding to figure out what she should do. Being able to figure out what one should do is a key aspect of competent moral agency. Another important presupposition of the Explanatory Account is that one who has moral understanding has *a systematic grasp of morality*:

> […] if you understand why you have moral reason to help the needy, for instance, you must have some awareness that the needs of other people are morally important and some grasp of their relative importance compared to other moral and non-moral considerations (such as self-interest). (Hills 2010, 101)

I want to preserve the intuitions that having moral understanding implies something like a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do. Let us say that these are the two intuitions about the kind of condition that an account of moral understanding should be able to accommodate. The difficulty I raise in the next section is that the relevant explanatory abilities can come apart from these two intuitions. We can imagine, as I will suggest, a person who can proficiently explain why a moral proposition is true, while importantly lacking moral understanding.

2. The Insufficiency Objection: one can have the relevant explanatory abilities, but lack moral understanding

To recognize that explanatory abilities are not sufficient to have moral understanding, we can imagine a person who proficiently explains why a moral proposition is true, but lacks moral understanding. Let us consider Professor C.:

> Professor C. works in a university. She is involved in a number of equity committees. During the committee meetings, she can follow the reasons given by a colleague who explains why sexism is wrong (e.g. sexism is wrong because it is an injustice whereby similar individuals are treated differently on the basis of a morally irrelevant characteristic (sex/gender)). She can explain in her own words why sexism in the classroom is wrong (e.g. sexism in the classroom is wrong because our university supports the highest standards of justice). She can also draw the conclusion that racism, being a form of discrimination similar to sexism, is wrong. She even writes reports about

> the question. Professor C. is proficient in all the relevant explanatory abilities. One day, during the monthly departmental meeting,[41] the head of department presents the members (including Professor C.) with a letter submitted by a group of students. The letter reports that female students are not treated fairly during certain seminars held in their department. They say that female students are given less opportunity to speak during these seminars and that their ideas are not taken as seriously as those of male students—the latter is also reflected in the grades the female students receive. The students provide solid evidence for what they say and ask that measures be taken against this problem of sexism. Most members of the meeting are concerned. They seriously consider the question. A lively discussion ensues and solutions are discussed. Professor C., unlike other meeting members, does not participate in the discussion, does not voice concern, and so on. She is not dismissive or distrustful of the students. Rather, she simply does not believe that the question requires her attention. Professor C. waits, arms crossed, indifferent to the issue.

Professor C.'s indifference signals a problem. Note that she has heard the content of the letter as clearly as the others have; she is not particularly tired on that day nor is she preoccupied with another issue. Professor C. has as much reason as other members of the meeting to be concerned with the content of this letter. However, she is indifferent.[42] Moreover, Professor C.'s indifference is not a fluke: she would also have been indifferent to reports of racism or unfair grading. The problem is not the particular question of gender or sex equity. Her indifference to injustice ranges across particular cases. What problem does her indifference signal?

The problem is that faced with real moral situations, Professor C. is incompetent. She is incompetent because she is not able to respond to situations properly: indifference is not an acceptable response to one's students reporting that they are being treated unfairly during seminars. Professor C. is incompetent, for one, because she does not fulfill her responsibilities toward the students, even though these responsibilities are uncontroversial. It is not that she is unsure whether she is responsible for fair treatment in their department and thus remains hesitant about contributing to the discussion. It is also not that she really does not know what to contribute—she is not, for instance, at a loss with regard to what can be done. She neglects her responsibilities, and therewith the individuals who are directly affected by these responsibilities, although those are clear. This failure, I want to press, stems from a lack of moral epistemic competence.

Professor C.'s systematic indifference signals that she does not have a systematic grasp of morality, that is, a grasp of what is morally important (I come back to the idea of importance

[41] I mean a university departmental meeting, which includes students, graduate students, and professors.
[42] I take indifference and *lack* of concern to be equivalent. One who is concerned is not indifferent. I am relying on the intuition that concern takes different faces, but that it at least involves some kind of engagement with the question. One, for instance, pays greater attention, thinks about the problem, etc.

in the next section). Because she does not have such a grasp, she does not understand what the situation demands of her and therefore lacks the ability to figure out what she should do. Recall, from Section 1, that these two intuitions about the nature of moral understanding are to be preserved. Professor C. is an example that these intuitions about the nature of moral understanding and the relevant explanatory abilities can come apart. Professor C. is in contact with the reasons why discrimination (like sexism or racism) is wrong when she writes reports for equity committees. However, she fails to recognize that the issue requires her concern and, therefore, her participation. One who is concerned engages with the situation, first, by paying attention to it. Indeed, other members of the department, faced with Professor C.'s indifference, can legitimately ask: what does she not understand? They might say, becoming impatient with Professor C.: "this situation requires your attention, come, think with us about what can be done. We are concerned, and so should you be." Her understanding of ethical situations is compromised, to say the least. What does Professor C. lack despite having abilities to devise lengthy explanations during equity committees?

Moral questions are highly *theoretical* for Professor C. This is why she stares with indifference when actually faced with such questions. She genuinely explains the reasons why sexism is wrong in her reports and believes that writing these reports is important to further moral knowledge. She does not doubt the relevance of reflecting on and discussing moral questions. Professor C. is an extreme case of *theoreticalism*: a dissociation between theory and practice. Professor C. upholds lofty moral ideals, but does not bridge these ideals to concrete, practical situations.[43] Theoreticalism is possible because the reasons why a moral proposition is true can be *identified* (as I take Professor C. to do), without being *appreciated*. However, it is appreciation which is central to competent moral agency. Professor C. is incompetent because she does not successfully *appreciate* the reasons why sexism is wrong.

There is a relation between appreciation and the kind of moral beliefs one forms. Professor C. does not understand the relation between the reasons she spells out and her actions. She thus fails to form a belief about what she should do. A competent moral agent, in her position, would have formed such a belief. The belief, for instance, that she should help or protect her students. Professor C., on the contrary, believes that the situation does not require her attention. She does not form a belief about what she should do. I take this to be revealed by

[43] I need to discuss below how such a bridge can arise and why it does arise in many (most?) moral agents and not in Professor C. Professor C. presents a case we can imagine, and which we can encounter in our surroundings, but I do not think it is common. Her recognition of moral values and ideals resides only in an abstract perspective of the world.

her indifference, which is incompatible with a belief about what one should do. Lacking the proper belief, Professor C. does not respond to the situation as she should have. For instance, she could have acknowledged that she understands the severity of the situation by showing concern. Her indifference signals a failure of appreciation, which results in more general moral incompetence. What is missing in someone like Professor C. is appreciation of the reasons why a moral proposition is true.

Understanding why a moral proposition is true demands that one form the right beliefs about the reasons why it is true on the basis of one's epistemic abilities. If someone can have the relevant explanatory abilities, but still fail to form the right beliefs, this means that the relevant explanatory abilities and moral understanding can come apart. The relevant explanatory abilities are not sufficient to have moral understanding. This is what I argued in this section. Notice, in relation to the points defended in Chapter 1, that it is relevant to the Explanatory Account's own consistency to recognize the problem of theoreticalism. The Explanatory Account is a nonreductionist account of moral understanding, that defends the pessimists' intuitions. It defends, as we can recall from Chapter 1, the Moral Competence Claim. Now, the problem brought forth with the example of Professor C. is that unless the reasons one provides in a moral explanation are reasons that are engaging for one, the worry which drives the pessimists' position about moral testimony remains intact. A problem one envisages with moral testimony is precisely that, although one can form certain moral beliefs (e.g. "This is sexist," "Sexism is unfair," "Injustice is wrong"), there remains a kind of belief—necessary to have moral understanding—that cannot passed on. It is this kind of belief that Professor C. does not form.

One who appreciates moral reasons forms, in light of the reasons why a moral proposition is true, a belief about what one should do: that is *a self-engaging belief*. I argue for this claim in Section 3, first, by distinguishing between appreciation and identification of moral reasons, and then by arguing that one appreciates moral reasons through the experience of their importance. In Section 3.3, I answer the objection that Professor C. does not lack moral understanding, but rather moral motivation. Under this reading of the example, Professor C. understands the moral situation, but remains indifferent because of a lack of care. In other words, her problem is not a cognitive one. I reject this suggestion. Although there is a lack of care in Professor C., it is an emotional lack, not a lack of motivation. I argue that there is an important difference between being moved by a moral situation and being motivated to act on that situation. Only the former plays a role in one's moral epistemic competence and, thus, in being able to form a self-engaging belief.

3. Appreciating versus identifying the reasons provided in a moral explanation

There is a distinction between appreciating and identifying the reasons why p is true. This difference explains why Professor C. can have the relevant explanatory abilities, while lacking moral understanding. One might exaggerate the intimacy of the relationship between appreciation and explanatory abilities because a moral explanation contains both explanatory and moral reasons. Moral reasons are normative reasons that make a demand on one. A normative reason "is a consideration that counts in favor of or against doing something" (Finlay and Schroeder 2017). Doing something encompasses attitudes. For instance, sexism, because it is an injustice, is a consideration that counts in favor of preventing it, of protecting its victims, and of disapproving of it. Moral reasons are justifying: they provide support for what one does (e.g. injustice is a reason for acting against unjust situations). A widespread idea is that moral facts are intrinsically reason giving.[44] For instance, although Steve desires to travel to Cuba for Christmas, he has a moral reason to stay home because his elderly father needs care—he does not have a reason to care for his elderly father only if he wants to, but because it would be wrong to leave him hanging. If Steve appreciates this reason, he forms a self-engaging belief: "I should stay to care for my father." Similarly, one who understands why sexism is wrong forms a self-engaging belief, such as: "I should not tolerate it" or, within a community, "We should not tolerate it."

Normative reasons generally contrast with the reasons provided in an explanation.[45] Explanatory reasons are facts that explain why things are as they are (e.g. the car rusted because of oxidation). A glaciology professor, for instance, can understand the reasons why glaciers

[44] There is an important debate between internalists and externalists about moral reasons. This debate regards the relation between moral reasons and motivation: how do these reasons motivate? I do not take this debate to be relevant for what I am defending here. The difference between identifying and appreciating moral reasons is not related to the motivational import of these reasons; one can appreciate moral reasons and fail to be relevantly motivated, and vice versa—although I take it that a fully competent moral agent, like a virtuous agent, both appreciates these reasons and is motivated to act on them. I also do not deny that motivation generally follows from appreciation. I only do not defend the idea that there is a conceptual relation between appreciation and motivation—the two psychological phenomena can come apart. In other words, making clear what appreciating moral reasons consists in does not militate in favor of internalism about moral reasons (the view that if one has a reason, then necessarily, one is motivated—at least to some extent—to act on it). It does not say anything against it either. About the debate between internalist and externalist about moral reasons see Shafer-Landau and Cuneo 2007, chapters 21 to 24.

[45] Justifying reasons also contrast with motivational reasons, reasons that *explain actions*—a reason that explains why a person acts: Paula's desire to reach the summit of the Matterhorn explains why she went mountaineering, but says nothing about whether she had good—normative—reasons to go; in fact, she had a normative reason not to go because of the high risk of avalanches threatening the safety of the group she was leading. Some take normative reasons to play both a justifying and an explanatory role—in the sense of explaining actions. This double role for normative reasons is not relevant here because motivational reasons are (generally) not those provided in a moral explanation. On the nature of normative reasons, see, for instance, Alvarez 2010, Raz 2011, Thomson 2008, especially Chapters 8 and 9.

form. She understands that they form when snow remains in the same area year-round which means that there is enough snow to transform into ice. She understands that each year, the new layer of snow compresses the previous one, which forces the snow to re-crystallize and form small grains. Gradually this grainy snow compacts and increases in density. Over time, this process makes it such that the bottom layers turn into ice, forming the glacier. For large glaciers, this can take more than a hundred years. Thanks to her understanding of this natural phenomenon, this glaciology professor can:

1. Follow an explanation of why p (glaciers form because of reason x, y) given by someone else (a colleague),
2. Explain why p in her own words (she teaches glaciology classes),
3. Draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q (that glaciers form in Switzerland given the conditions x, y),
4. Draw the conclusion that p' (or that probably p') from the information that q' (that glaciers form in Alaska given the conditions x', y'),
5. Given the information that p, give the right explanation q (explain why glaciers can form in Switzerland),
6. Given the information that p', give the right explanation q' (explain why glaciers can form in Patagonia).

This glaciology professor is competent with regard to this area of Earth sciences. Does she identify the reasons why glaciers form or does she appreciate them? She identifies them. She provides explanations to a question of the form "why do glaciers form?"—a question about how the world is or functions. She forms beliefs about the facts explaining why glaciers form based on observations, demonstrations, and models (field work, experiments, theoretical analyses). To be a competent Earth scientist, she does not need, additionally, to appreciate those reasons. She does not need to appreciate the facts that explain why glaciers form because no one deliberates about whether glaciers form the right way or whether they should form otherwise. Glacier formation does not involve our agency. It is a theoretical, as opposed to a practical, question.

Practical questions demand that one identify explanatory reasons and appreciate moral reasons, whereas theoretical questions only demand that one identify explanatory reasons.[46] Theoretical and practical questions both ask us to form the right beliefs about the world. However, what determines what is true varies in accordance with the object studied. Moral understanding is an intellectual competence applied to, as Aristotle put it, "thought and truth concerned with action" (*NE* 1139a26). The true beliefs we form on the basis of our moral understanding are about the sphere of life that we need to experience, explore, question, and deliberate about. Theoretical inquiry (e.g. how do glaciers form?) demands observations, experiments, and reflection to provide a description of a phenomenon. Unlike in practical inquiry, questions like "Is this the right way?" or "Is this what I should do?" are not relevant to theoretical inquiry. The fact that glacier formation involves the crystallization of snow or high density of the snow blanket is not something about which we can meaningfully ask "Is this right? What should I do about it?" However, the fact that lying is disrespectful or the fact that sexism is unjust admits of such questions.

Some of the reasons provided in a moral explanation are facts that explain why things are as they are, and some are justifying reasons. I argue that one needs to develop a relation of appreciation with the latter. Understanding why a moral proposition is true cannot remain theoretical. A competent moral agent, because she is engaged epistemically within a practical pursuit, does not just do the actions that she does, or know what she should do and why, but she develops a certain *relation* to the reasons why she should act. I take this to mean that she tries, as far as ethical life goes, to figure out *what the world asks of her*.[47] We can consider what is important for moral development to better appreciate this. A child can know that she ought not to lie; however, what is important for her moral development is that she comes to understand why she ought not to do these things. That is, she should understand how the moral facts that

[46] I distinguish between practical and theoretical questions, on the assumption that both engage us intellectually. This allows for a difference, dating back to Aristotle, between practical intellectual virtues and theoretical intellectual virtues. See Aristotle's discussion of both kinds of intellectual virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI. Aristotle takes this to be a central distinction, as Paula Gottlieb argues, because the practical intellectual virtues are the unifying principle between the ethical virtues—what keeps them in equilibrium. See Gottlieb 2009, Chapters 1 and 5.

[47] I write "what the world asks of her." This might sound to some like a form of reasons externalism—the view that there is no necessary relationship between normative reasons and motivation. However, I do not think it needs to be. As Valerie Tiberius notes, reasons externalism captures the common folk intuition that there are reasons for people to act regardless of their motivations: "moral reasons […] are reasons for people to act morally whatever they happen to want to do" (Tiberius 2015, 52). We think that someone has a reason to provide good care for one's children regardless of what they want—say, if one wanted rather to have their children work in a factory to make money. It is in that sense that a situation (or the world) asks something of us. Reasons internalism also has to accommodate, it seems fair to say, this common intuition.

explain why a moral proposition is true relate to her actions, and more generally to how she lives.

What does it mean to appreciate moral reasons? Common accounts of appreciation say that one appreciates when one recognizes the nature, worth, quality or significance of that which is appreciated ("Appreciate" 2022). For what follows, I define *appreciating* as recognizing *the importance* of the action, object, person or situation which is appreciated. Emphasis on importance is intuitive, I believe, and it also agrees with the Explanatory Account's assumptions that to have moral understanding it is necessary, for instance, to have "grasped the importance of not deceiving others" (Hills 2010, 193), or to "have some awareness that the needs of other people are morally important" (Hills 2010, 101). I want to preserve these assumptions. Let us consider the difference between identifying and appreciating a person, to see what it means to recognize the importance of someone. One can identify Sissy as a student in a classroom: one sees that Sissy is there and checks her off the register. Appreciating Sissy, on the other hand, suggests that one knows Sissy to a certain extent *and* ackowledges her worth. Recognizing the importance of a person is more epistemically engaging than identifying that person because it demands that one draws additional relations between the abilities or properties of that person and a certain goal, field or subject matter. For instance, appreciating Sissy as a singer implies that one understands a thing or two about singing, including what good singing involves. Appreciating the reasons why an action is right or wrong implies, similarly, that one recognizes the importance of the properties instantiated by this action.

To see that appreciating the reasons why an action is right or wrong implies that one recognizes the importance of the properties of this action, we can think of the role of moral education. The goal of moral education is not merely that children grow up to be able to identify moral reasons, but that they are able to appreciate how these reasons relate to their life with others and to how they live in general. For instance, if Mary explains the reasons why lying is wrong to her children, then she does not merely describe causal relations. Rather, by carefully spelling out considerations that count against lying, she tries to convey to her children how these considerations relate to the promotion of conditions under which humans can maintain a community of people, develop trust, respect each other, and so on. In other words, she explains to her children why it is important to be honest. Professor C. is able to identify the reasons why something is wrong—she can, as it were, check them off a list. However, her indifference suggests that she has no recognition of their importance. This case is different from that of the glaciologist for whom understanding why glaciers form asks nothing more than to identify the reasons why they form. The reasons why glaciers form have no practical importance.

Understanding the reasons why sexism is wrong, on the other hand, cannot remain at a level of theoretical description. These reasons are by nature bearers of importance and are, therefore, engaging for one. To defend this, I first need to better explain why the content of moral explanations needs to be appreciated. I do this in Section 3.1. Then I further clarify, in Section 3.2, what it means to appreciate moral reason.

3.1 Content of moral explanations

The reasons given in moral explanations are provided by the instantiation of non-moral and moral features that form moral considerations (reason-giving features). A competent moral agent recognizes that moral considerations speak to her agency. To see this, let us consider the following three moral propositions:

P1: "This behavior is sexist,"
P2: "Sexism is wrong,"
P3: "I should not tolerate sexism."

Professor C. forms the beliefs that P1 and P2 are true. She can provide the following explanations:

Explanation 1: This behavior is sexist *because* it implies that certain individuals are treated differently than similar others based on a morally irrelevant characteristic (sex/gender).

Explanation 2: Sexism is wrong *because* it is an injustice.

However, she does not form a belief about P3. She does not understand that she should not tolerate sexism because it is wrong. She does not understand why P3 is true and forms no belief about an explanation like explanation 3:

Explanation 3: I should not tolerate sexism in our department *because* it is an injustice.

Explanation 1 provides an explanatory reason: a reason why a certain moral property is exemplified. Explanation 2 provides a justifying and an explanatory reason: it explains why something is wrong and provides a reason to act (I come to the kind of reason below).

Explanation 3 provides a justifying reason: it explains why one should do something. Thus, one can form moral beliefs of at least three different kinds: two different kinds of belief about different moral properties, and a belief about what one should do, like in P1 to P3. My point here is that only the former two beliefs are presupposed by the Explanatory Account. An account of what it means to understand why a moral proposition is true should, however, be illuminating for all three kinds of moral propositions. Moral understanding, even to a low degree, asks that one forms beliefs about reasons given in explanations 1, 2, *and* 3 and the relation between those reasons (e.g. "Given that it is an injustice, I should not tolerate sexism"). This does not devalue the role of explanatory reasons in gaining moral understanding. Identifying the reasons why a moral value is exemplified is often necessary to appreciate justificatory reasons because it describes how these reasons relate to the situation one is confronted with.

Why can the content of a moral explanation be both appreciated and identified? One explains, for instance, that lying is wrong because it is *disrespectful*, that sexism is wrong because it is *unjust* or that eating meat is wrong because it is *cruel*. Those moral propositions are true because such properties are exemplified. Properties like disrespectfulness, injustice, and cruelty are *thick ethical evaluative properties*. When the concepts picking out these properties apply, we are provided, as Bernard Williams argues, with a fact that explains how the world is and with a reason to act. As Williams writes:

> If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action … We may say, summarily, that such concepts are "action-guiding." At the same time, their application is guided by the world. A concept of this sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply to some new situation […] We can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guiding. (Williams 1985, 140)

We are provided, when thick ethical evaluative concepts apply, with an explanatory and a justifying reason. Given that the application of these concepts is world-guided, one can, like Professor C., rightly form a belief about why they apply. However, beliefs about the reason why an ethical property is instantiated are not sufficient to gain understanding of an ethical situation. To understand an ethical situation, one needs to identify the reasons why moral properties are exemplified *and* recognize the importance that these properties convey about the situation. Philippa Foot makes a similar point about the relation a virtuous person (e.g. an honest, fair, courageous, generous person) has with moral considerations. She writes: "Those who possess these virtues possess them in so far as they recognize certain considerations (such

as the fact of a promise, or of a neighbor's need) as powerful, and in many circumstances compelling, reasons for acting" (Foot 2001, 12). The considerations a virtuous person recognizes as powerful reasons for acting are provided by the fact that moral situations exemplify thick ethical evaluative properties (care, courage, cruelty, hurtfulness, injustice, kindness, and so on). What does it mean to recognize the importance of situations that exemplify thick ethical evaluative properties? This is the question I want to answer in the next section.

3.2 Appreciating as experiencing importance

To understand what it means to appreciate the importance of events, objects or situations that exemplify thick ethical evaluative properties, we need to be clearer on the latter's nature and role in moral explanation. Evaluative properties qualify as (dis)valuable events, objects or situations that instantiate them (e.g. a *caring* person, a *courageous* action, a *morally disgusting* situation). I cannot delve deep here into the intricate metaphysics of evaluative properties.[48] Let us note three things. First is that the range of values extends beyond ethical values. There are, for instance, aesthetic, economical, epistemological or conventional values. I am interested here in ethical values. Second is that along what is called the thin-thick continuum are the *thin* evaluative concepts at one end, and the *thick* evaluative concepts at the other (Tappolet 2004). Thin evaluations made with concepts like "good," "bad" or "better than" carry minimal or no descriptive content. They contrast with thick evaluations that convey more information about a situation through thick evaluative concepts. As such, thick evaluations can explain thin ones. Saying, for instance, that "Mrs. Mitkus is a good person" conveys the information that she is meriting our approbation, but it says nothing about *the reasons why* she is good. It is, for instance, her kindness and generosity that can explain why she is good. Third, on the thin side of the continuum are also deontic concepts ("ought," "right," "wrong," "obligation"). Deontic concepts contrast with values because these normative concepts do not allow degrees and essentially prescribe actions (e.g. "You ought not to lie").[49] Some might say that moral reasons not provided by values, but by other considerations like obligations, are not captured by value appreciation. That said, a person who has moral understanding understands why she has an obligation. The instantiation of values generally explains obligations (e.g. I *ought* to do it

[48] For a comprehensive discussion of the nature of value see Orsi 2015.

[49] While both deontic and evaluative concepts are action guiding, deontic concepts—as opposed to evaluative ones—cannot be graded: while Anna can be more generous than Paul, Anna does not have more of a duty to help those in need than Paul. Norms or deontic concepts are a matter of all or nothing. See Ogien and Tappolet 2009, 60–66.

because it is just, respectful, courageous, generous, and so on). While some obligations do not appear to be provided by values (obligations based on rights, for instance), values nevertheless play a role in explaining why these obligations stand. For instance, one has a right not to suffer because one has an interest not to suffer—*suffering* figures in the explanation of the reasons why one is obliged to another in virtue of her right. Hence, grasping the importance of not making others suffer is part of understanding why one has an obligation. If this is correct, then reasons given by the evaluative properties picked out by thick ethical evaluative concepts are primordial.[50]

Having moral understanding involves that one appreciates reasons given by the features of our environment picked out by thick ethical evaluative concepts. These properties are what I focus on for this discussion.[51] Unless stipulated otherwise, I now use the term "value" to mean thick ethical value.[52] For the remainder of this section, I further motivate the claim that appreciation takes place experientially. I remain, at this stage, vague with regard to the nature of the experience that makes appreciation possible. I rely on our intuition that an experience is necessary to reveal the reason-giving character of moral situations. In Chapter 5, I will argue that emotional experiences reveal normative character. For now, I will defend the Appreciation Principle:

> AP: One appreciates moral reasons if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do.

Let us consider what would be necessary to gain mastery of thick ethical concepts to better flesh out what it means to appreciate moral reasons. Having mastery of a thick ethical concept involves recognizing its conditions of application *and* having a certain response. The response can be both affective (e.g. admiration, indignation, concern) or an action (e.g. congratulating,

[50] For further discussion on this topic see von Wright 1963; Mulligan 1998; Ogien and Tappolet 2009. On the view that thick concepts are not reducible, see Kirchin 2013, chapter 2.

[51] That said, it does not mean that we should draw a very strict division between thin and thick ethical concepts. Thick evaluative concepts bear an intimate relation with thin ones. This perhaps means, contra Williams, that thin ethical concepts are considerably less descriptively empty than he supposes, at least if they can qualify an object or situation in virtue of thicker concepts (e.g. she is a good teacher because she is generous). The idea of situating these concepts along a continuum is appealing, rather than drawing a strict division between those which are descriptive and prescriptive and those which are merely prescriptive. Thick concepts will have greater descriptive content than the thin ones; however, the latter will not necessarily always be only prescriptive. For more on this topic and positions which differ from Williams, see Scheffler 1987; Tappolet 2004.

[52] While the present discussion focuses on ethical values, there are also, for instance, prudential (safety), aesthetic (the beautiful), and epistemic (truth) values.

protesting, helping).[53] The following example can illustrate the claim. An anthropologist who is traveling to a remote island in the south Pacific Ocean becomes especially close to the Kumi people.[54] Soon, the anthropologist notices that Kumis sometimes come back to the village with a human scalp and are congratulated because their actions are *gopa*. The Kumi word "gopa" seems to capture what we would say is courageous. Kumis admire gopa actions. The anthropologist is horrified by the practice. She nonetheless takes notes to understand which situations are qualified "gopa." Eventually, she successfully identifies them. One evening, while discussing with a Kumi, it becomes clear to the anthropologist that, despite being able to identify which situations are "gopa," she nevertheless does not understand what such qualifications mean within Kumi practices:

A: "Ok this is gopa." She frowns.
K: Wait! Aren't you happy?
A: No. Why so?
K: Well, usually we celebrate gopa things. You know?
A: Not really. No.
K: Do you understand what it means when something is gopa?

The anthropologist recognizes the conditions under which the concept applies. However, she realizes that she lacks mastery of the concept because she does not have the proper response.

For prescriptivists, who take the descriptive element of the evaluative concept alone to govern its application, the anthropologist has mastery of the concept "gopa." They would disagree with my analysis.[55] Yet, I think we have reasons to question the prescriptivist view, as Williams does. He asks how one can "go on" from one application of a concept to another only with its descriptive content because use of evaluative concepts is tied to the kind of interests they represent. New users of such concepts could then not see how people "go on"

[53] I think the way I put things here can lead to unnecessary confusion if we get entangled in a conceptual point. Some might disagree that the anthropologist does not have full mastery of the concept because they define having mastery of a concept as being able to apply it to relevant situations, whereas I am introducing here an additional element tied to the response of the concept user. The point I emphasize is that the anthropologist has only partial possession of the concept and, as such, she lacks evaluative understanding. If some want to separate "having mastery of evaluative concepts" from "having evaluative understanding," where the latter is more demanding than the former, I think it can also suit this. I am simply not framing my argument this way.
[54] I take inspiration for this example from Gibbard and Blackburn 1992, but I have changed some elements.
[55] Bernard Williams writes that under the prescriptivist account, a thick ethical concept "can be analyzed into a descriptive and a prescriptive element: it is guided round the world by its descriptive content, but has a prescriptive flag attached to it" (Williams 1985, 141). However, as he says, this account provides a real explanation of the way in which the prescriptive flag is supposed to be action-guiding.

with it, if they did not share (at least to a certain extent) the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has meaning. Even a sympathetic observer, like the anthropologist, would thus need to share some evaluative interests of the people for whom the concept has its meaning to be able to "grasp imaginatively its evaluative point" (Williams 1985, 142) and to "go on" with the concept like them. A sympathetic observer cannot "pick up the concept simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world" (ibid.). Does a sympathetic observer need to appreciate the situation, at least imaginatively, to be able to learn to use the concept? Is this the kind of appreciation I am advancing? Not quite, and Williams raises another point which I need to discuss to further clarify the distinction between appreciating and identifying:

> The sympathetic observer can follow the practice of the people he is observing; he can report, anticipate, and even take part in discussion of the use they make of their concept. But, as with some other concepts of theirs, relating to religion, for instance, or to witchcraft, he may not be ultimately identified with the use of the concept: it may not really be his. (Ibid.)

A sympathetic observer could follow the practices of the community she is observing, and thus not fully stand outside their evaluative interests, whilst the concept is not *hers*. If Williams is correct, then one can gain mastery of an evaluative concept, while not *living by* the concept.[56] What does this mean? How does the sympathetic observer differ from those who *live by* the concept—those for whom it is *their* concept?

The difference is one of understanding. Both the Kumi and the anthropologist know which actions are gopa. The sympathetic observer, as well as those who live by the concept, can make evaluative judgments. However, one understands an evaluative situation when one appreciates that it gives one reasons to act. The sympathetic observer does not take the situation, like the Kumi do, to give her reasons to act. She does not form, to come back to the distinction between three types of moral beliefs made in the previous section, a belief about what she should do.

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[56] Adrian Moore (2006, 137) distinguishes one who *lives by* a concept from one who does not—one is disengaged: "To grasp a thick ethical concept in the disengaged way is to be able to recognize when the concept would (correctly) be applied, to be able to understand others when they apply it, and so forth. To grasp a thick ethical concept in the engaged way is not only to be able to do these things, but also to feel sufficiently at home with the concept to be prepared to apply it oneself, where being prepared to apply it oneself means being prepared to apply it not just in overt acts of communication but also in how one thinks about the world and in how one conducts one's affairs. […] We might say that such a person *lives by* the concept."

One appreciates moral reasons when one lives by the reason-giving character of thick evaluative concepts. Concepts are elements of content which (along with other elements such as logical connectors) account for the inferential power of judgments and, more generally, of mental states involved in our reasoning processes (e.g. one can see a teacher only allowing certain students to speak, but one needs the concept "sexist" to judge that the gesture is sexist). Considering the role played by concepts in our inferential networks, we might wonder how thick ethical concepts can play their role in our moral reasoning, and in our moral practices more generally, if their evaluative aspect does not figure in the conditions for our competent use of them. To successfully apply ethical concepts such as admirable, cruel, disrespectful, grand, indignant, irresponsible, monstrous, shameful, and so on, one identifies the non-evaluative features that make the application of the concept correct *and* one recognizes the situation as having importance.[57] One then understands, in light of this importance, the situation as calling for a certain response—one understands the situation as reason-giving.

How could one take part in the practices where thick ethical concepts have meaning without understanding their normative aspect? A person with very good moral understanding (a virtuous person) has, as Hills writes, "a distinctive grasp of what is important, in the light of which she chooses what to do" (Hills 2015, 7). I argue that the grasp of what is important issues from a *normative experience* we have to undergo: an experience that is necessary for one to recognize the situation as reason-giving. The difference pressed with the Appreciation Principle is that between a *normative judgment* (e.g. judging that x is admirable) and *experiencing the world normatively*—experiencing the admirable as giving one reasons to act. To make an evaluative judgment one needs the concept, but to gain the concept one needs to experience the world a certain way. Having moral understanding not only consists in having this experience; this experience is necessary to form a moral belief about what one should do. It is through this experience that one appreciates moral reasons.

The idea that experience is central to develop and exercise competent moral agency is not novel. Experience is necessary, according to Aristotle, for developing virtue of character: "we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions […]" (*NE* 1103a34–35). In this example, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of life experience generally: the fact of experiencing a number of different situations in relation to which we learn to adjust ourselves and become

[57] The idea of importance does not only signify that a situation has positive value. Importance means that a situation has a value (positive or negative) and deserves, as such, one's attention, actions, etc. A cruel action, for instance, has importance in that it asks one to boycott it, apologize, or the like.

better attuned to what is right to do. Aristotle also believed that experience is necessary to develop and exercise *phronesis*, the intellectual virtue concerned with action and key to moral competence: "Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time" (*NE* 1103a16–17). We might interpret Aristotle's insistence on experience to mean, as others have argued elsewhere, that experience contributes something necessary to one's understanding.[58] In experiencing, for instance, Casa Milà for oneself (going to Barcelona, seeing, exploring, surveying, visiting, even getting *a feel* of the building), a person comes to appreciate this architectural artwork better. That is the case, importantly, regardless of whether one thereby gains knowledge of new propositions or improves the warrant for one's beliefs. Similarly, we might say that it is as they experience (see, explore, survey, get a feel of) moral situations that moral agents develop their appreciation of moral phenomena like care, courage, cruelty, injustice, respect, and so on.

How does experience change the anthropologist's epistemic standing? After months with the Kumi, she joins in with their dynamics. She experiences, for instance, the strains of living on sparse resources and under threats from other tribes. She realizes that the manhunting practices, when done under specific conditions, are very effective to preserve safety. The anthropologist experiences *relief*, as safety is brought about by the manhunting practices. Over time, thanks to these experiences, she understands the importance of gopa practices. This is how a sympathetic observer, like the anthropologist, comes to understand the reason-giving character of an ethical situation. To better see that an experience bridges theoretical moral understanding with real-life situations, thus enabling one to make moral reasons *her own* and form the right beliefs about them, we can consider how children gain moral understanding. A child often, like a sympathetic observer, first meets ethical situations by following certain rules given by her parents (e.g. "Do not lie to Mommy," "Share your candy with your friend," "Do not pull your sister's hair"). A child who only follows rules is not yet a competent moral agent. She is a novice and will be as long as she does not herself recognize what situations ask of her. How does one go from being a novice to being a competent moral agent? Coming back to the example of Mary, what did the child Mary learn to become an adult with moral understanding? The adult Mary does not generally lie, but will tell a white lie to her child to protect her from a danger; she helps those in need, but not to the point of self-sacrifice; she opposes unfair pratices in her workplace, but does so intelligently, and so on. The child Mary has learned to

[58] The idea that experience makes a necessary contribution to one's understanding is a point defended by Roberts and Wood (2007, Chapter 2). Sliwa (2017, Section V) makes a similar point.

appreciate moral situations through experiences she has undergone. As such, and in relation to Chapter 1, the understanding she has developed was not transmitted to her by others. This supports the claim that there is something key about a moral agent's relation to moral reasons that cannot be gained via testimony.

The idea of appreciating moral reason through a form of experience differs from the prescriptivists' position. The complex conditions of the application of evaluative concepts which this experience reveals do not supervene on the moral agent's desires, but on her ability to recognize what certain features of the world demand of her. The question is not whether the anthropologist approves of gopa situations, but that she should approve. The Kumi need these practices to go on, in their case literally to survive. While this example is restricted to rare practices of survival, the question becomes more pressing with regard to common ethical practices where concepts like admirable, caring, courageous, cruel, respectful, and unjust guide our daily lives.

Some might object that concepts such as *chaste* or *chivalrous* undermine my point because their application conditions really are relative to practices that do not concern people normatively. One does not have reasons to be chaste, in the way that one has reasons to be honest. But that is not quite right. There are many more *thick evaluative* concepts than there are *thick ethical evaluative* concepts. Concepts like chaste or chivalrous find their normativity within the practices to which they belong. Chastity is embedded in religious practices that favor a certain attitude toward sexual intercourse. Chivalry was embedded in the medieval practices of knighthood, and what remains of this concept today in terms of showing courtesy toward women is only a relic of its older use. Needless to say, those who live by the concept chaste or those who lived by the concept chivalrous are or were fully taking part in the normativity of these practices (e.g. to be a good celibate Catholic clerk, one should stay chaste). Most of us do not take part in these practices and some are sympathetic observers, some not. These observers grasp these concepts in a disengaged way: whether their actions are chaste or chivalrous does not affect how they go about their lives. The concepts which are important for the present discussion, however, relate to practices in which, it seems fair to say, most humans take part; practices with regard to which it seems quite unintelligible to remain sympathetic observers (I come back to this point in the next chapter). Human beings could not get by without moral practices because these promote and maintain the space in which human life can thrive.

I have argued since the beginning of Section 3 that appreciation differs from identification because it involves a kind of experience whereby one comes to live by the ethical

concepts that pick out reason-giving properties. One appreciates moral reasons if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do. Professor C. is an example of one who lacks appreciation and therefore lacks moral understanding. Moral understanding is an epistemic competence. A competence supposes that one has the abilities needed to do something successfully. This discussion should support the claim that explanatory abilities, central to the Explanatory Account, are insufficient to account for the abilities characteristic of moral understanding. I relied, for this discussion, on the intuition that experience contributes to moral understanding. But I have said little, other than motivate the idea with examples, about the nature of this experience. It is left to me in the next chapters to defend the idea further. This experience is necessary, but far from sufficient to have moral understanding. As I will argue in the following chapters, our ability to appreciate through experience needs to be supplemented with a form of epistemic engagement that controls for the right orientation of our experience of the world. Not every experience enables appreciation and not all of our experiences can be taken at face value. Appreciation, in other words, demands that one remain critical of one's experience. This claim might seem counterintuitive, but I believe it will be made agreeable once I argue, in Chapter 4, that a form of attentional activity plays this critical role. This attentional activity does not exhaust epistemic engagement, but it is the key factor in making moral considerations available to one's experience.

Appreciation is necessary to have moral understanding—this is why we can say that Professor C. lacks moral understanding—but it is not sufficient. Defenders of the Explanatory Account might say that appreciation, in addition to the explanatory abilities, is what is necessary and sufficient to have moral understanding. This is something I will challenge in Section 4, where I raise a second objection that should support the claim that explanatory abilities are not necessary to have moral understanding. Before I move to this second objection, I must address the worry that my notion of appreciation is reducible to a form of motivation.

3.3 Is appreciating just being motivated?

Some might worry that the notion of appreciation I am developing here is not an epistemic, but rather a conative notion. They might worry that appreciating seems to entail that a moral agent has the right conative states (desires, emotions). If this is the case, then Professor C. recognizes all the moral considerations, but lacks the proper conative states and the notion of appreciation captures only the non-cognitive aspect of one's moral competence. A characteristic aspect of Professor C. I have emphasized is her indifference, which signals that she is not engaged with

the situation. She does not, for instance, pay attention to it and is not moved by it. Recall, from Chapter 1, that Laura Frances Callahan (2018) argues that having moral understanding involves being moved by moral reasons and motivated to act on them.[59] Moreover, this aspect of our moral understanding is necessary, according to Callahan, to capture our reluctance toward moral testimony because emotional and motivational states are difficult—perhaps impossible—to transmit via testimony (see Callahan 2018, Section VI). Is this also what I defend?

The example of Professor C. is supposed to compel us to accept the claim that one who is indifferent toward a moral question lacks something of great moral importance. The case of Professor C. is not the only way in which one can lack moral understanding—I discuss other ways in the next chapter—but it is supposed to have us accept that despite her explanatory proficiency, she lacks something central which transpires through her indifference. I construe indifference as a problem in the architecture of appreciation because it prevents one from forming beliefs like "I should help them" or "We should do something about this." In that sense, if emotions do play an important role in the process of appreciation, then it is an epistemic role, independent of their potential motivational role. In other words, recognizing the importance of moral considerations involves *being moved* by those considerations. However, being moved—undergoing an emotional experience—does not amount to being motivated.

To see the difference between being moved and being motivated, let us first accept that we would expect from Professor C., once she is informed of the problem of sexism in her department, to experience certain emotions. This being said, we should be cautious not to oversimplify the complexity of moral experience. Let us consider the moral experience of one of her colleagues, who answers the moral situation with competence: one is given the information that there is a problem of sexism in their department, one feels indignation (or one is upset, or worried, or sad), one forms the belief that "This is unacceptable" or "How sad, not again!" One forms the belief "I must do something" or "We must do something," one feels and expresses one's concern to the students and to other colleagues.[60] Eventually one does

[59] Recall she claims that: "Plausibly, one doesn't have understanding of the fact (or one doesn't really understand), e.g. that a certain practice is racist, if it doesn't make one angry or sad, or if one has no will to prevent or intervene in the practice, given a clear opportunity" (Callahan 2018, 452).

[60] As we see in this discussion, in this chapter, but also in the ones to come, for purposes of space and clarity of argument, we need to simplify descriptions of moral experiences. For instance, faced with injustice, we will say that one feels indignant—a form of anger directed at injustice—or one sees moral cowardice and feels contempt (i.e. to each moral property their own emotional response). While I think this is true, it nevertheless often oversimplifies the intricacies of our moral responses. For instance, when one finds out that some students are the victims of sexism in their department, one responds to the injustice with anger, but one can also be quite worried about the students and wonder how they are faring, one can feel deep sadness that, still today, this insidious

something about it. Notice that emotions enable the formation of beliefs about what one should do, and, in a second step, they testify to the fact that one understands the situation—by showing concern, one manifests one's understanding of the fact that the situation demands certain actions, or at the least one's attention. Indifference signals that the situation does not speak to one's agency, although it should.

Professor C.'s indifference stems from and presents an epistemic problem, not a motivational one. To better see this, we can consider a situation where, while both Mary and Professor C. have reasons to help (e.g. by defending the students who have been the victim of sexism), only Mary is concerned. Is their difference motivational? Does Mary, for instance, show strength of will and Professor C. weakness of will? In other words, does Mary show strong motivations and Professor C. weak motivations to do what is right? The difference, rather, is that Mary has a better grasp of the relation between the different elements of this situation (e.g. she can relate the information that "there is sexism" to the fact that "it is wrong" and to her agency), than Professor C. does. To see this, let us consider a simpler example. If a person, having read a cookbook, explains how to bake a chocolate soufflé, but then bakes a terrible soufflé, does she lack motivation or does she—despite having explained—not understand how to bake a soufflé? Some might say that the person lacks certain baking skills. In any case, her failure to bake the soufflé shows that she lacks what is necessary to bake such an item, but not that she lacks motivation. The motivated, but mediocre, baker lacks the understanding necessary to carry out her goal. There is a similar difference between Mary and Professor C.: only Mary's moral epistemic standing allows her to successfully carry out ethical goals because she forms moral beliefs that allow her to answer moral questions.

We need to accommodate the fact that a person can appreciate moral reasons, while lacking motivation to act on those reasons. The psychological profiles of weak- and strong-willed moral agents can support this claim. Both the weak- and strong-willed, despite being cognitively well-attuned to a moral situation, experience motivational conflict—they have conflicting desires. For Aristotle, what leads to action is a function of a cognitive and a conative state: "The function of what thinks about action is truth agreeing with correct desires. […] The source of motion of an action is desire and goal-directed reason" (*NE* 1139a30–33).[61] In other words, what sets apart the weak- from the strong-willed is not her cognitive attunement with a

problem finds its way into the classroom, despite all efforts to stop it. One can feel anger, moreover, but a tangled bundle of anger at the injustice, at the colleague one knows to be responsible for the sexist treatment, at the head of faculty for unfairly protecting that colleague despite that person's behavior, and so on. I carry on with the simplified versions of moral experiences, but I keep in mind that they are often more complex.

[61] Aristotle's discussion of weak- and strong-willed moral agents is in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII.

moral situation (recognizing what a moral situation asks of one), nor is it that they are conflicted (they are both conflicted), but rather how the conflict is resolved: "someone is called [strong-willed] or [weak-willed] because his understanding is or is not the master […]" (*NE* 1168b35). Both are moral agents who appreciate moral reasons and for whom it is uncertain whether they will act on those reasons because they are motivationally conflicted. Why do they have an internal conflict? Precisely because they appreciate moral reasons—they have formed beliefs about what they should do, but they have conflicting desires. As Aristotle writes: "The [weak-willed] person knows that his actions are base, but does them because of his feelings, whereas the [strong-willed] person knows that his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them" (*NE* 1145b11–14). Professor C. does not lack motivation, like a weak-willed moral agent, because she is not even in a position to know that her appetites are base. If Professor C. were weak-willed, she would have been conflicted. However, we find no such conflict in her: she remains fully unconflicted—she is indifferent. In this respect, she has three problems: she is not moved; she does not form the right beliefs; and she is not motivated.[62] However, her lack of motivation is of lesser importance so long as she does not form the right beliefs. The point I am pressing here is that she needs to be moved in the right way to form the right beliefs—that is, a self-engaging belief.

Note, moreover, that emotions play an important role in guiding a moral agent's attunement to a moral situation: "If the generous person finds that his spending deviates from what is fine and right, he will feel pain, but moderately and in the right way; for it is proper to virtue to feel both pleasure and pain in the right things and in the right way" (*NE* 1121a1–4). Right action for a virtuous person is both "recognizing particular considerations as reasons for actions [and acting] on these reasons as he should" (Foot 2001, 13). The generous person, for instance, will "aim at the fine in his giving, and will give correctly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, at the right time, and all the other things that are implied by correct giving" (*NE* 1120a25–26). The generous person, crucially, guides her actions with the aid of emotional responses, grieving or feeling ashamed when she spends too much, rejoicing when she gives the right amount, feeling compassion toward those in need, expressing concern, if she knows she should give, but cannot.

Lastly, one might ask whether emotions and motivation can really come apart in the way I suggest. Can someone be concerned, as I described above, but still not be motivated?

[62] Forming the right belief (a self-engaging belief about what one should do) is a consequence of being moved. I tend to think of it as constitutive of the normative experience, rather than as being caused by this experience. I hope this aspect will become clearer in Chapter 5, where I detail the phenomenology of that experience.

The condition of a deeply depressed person supports my claim. A deeply depressed person is one who appreciates moral reasons (e.g. she believes she should be involved in fighting sexism in her community), but, because of her condition, simply does not find the strength to act.[6364] A similar case, although not clinically studied, could be a person, for instance an animal rights' activists, who, despite appreciating moral reasons and having acted on them for a long time, becomes deeply discouraged by the inertia of the situation: one can become demotivated at the thought that one's actions are for naught.[65] This then should provide answers to those who wonder how appreciation differs from motivation. That is not to overlook the fact that we need a more detailed account of what it means to be moved. This section could only offer preliminary clarifications. I further develop what it means to be moved and how this relates to normative experience in Chapter 5, where I argue that one experiences the importance of moral considerations through emotional experience.

4. The Inarticulacy Objection: one can have moral understanding while not being able to explain

Does one need to have the relevant explanatory abilities, in addition to appreciation, to have moral understanding? I argued in the previous sections that explanatory abilities are not sufficient to have moral understanding. One can be explanatorily proficient, while lacking appreciation of moral reasons, which is necessary to have moral understanding. However, while not being sufficient, the relevant explanatory abilities might nevertheless be necessary to have moral understanding. I argue in this section that they are not.

To accept that one does not need explanatory abilities to have moral understanding, let us first consider the epistemic competence Mary displays (recall the Mary example from Section 1) when faced with a particular moral situation. In the example "Mary at work," Mary knows that it would make her life easier to lie to her work colleague about the deficits of the company, but she also understands that she has reasons to be honest:

[63] I thank Valéry Giroux for raising this point.
[64] As Kevin A. Aho (2013) explains, people suffering from depression experience disruptions in everyday experiences that affect their capacity to form desires and to act. They feel unable to attend to what used to matter to them. See also Tully 2017.
[65] I have in mind the example of a colleague who told me that after years of engagement fighting for animal rights, he became so overwhelmed by what he felt was the inertia of the cause that he stopped his activism, started consuming animal products again, etc. He did not stop appreciating the reasons to be fair toward animals, however; he just could not motivate himself to act in support of what looked to him like a lost cause.

> Mary at work: Mary believes that she has reasons not to lie to her work colleague because withholding the truth would disrespect this colleague. Mary values this person and recognizes the importance of not disrespecting her. Mary understands that her colleague needs to feel respected for good mutual understanding to be maintained. Moreover, Mary does not want to hurt her colleague and wants to preserve the relation of trust they have developed over the years. Mary believes that she should not lie to her colleague.

Mary forms the belief that she should not lie to her colleague even if it would be easier to do so. Mary needs to have a generally good grasp of morality to engage with this particular moral question. Her epistemic engagement means that she is actively trying to figure out what to do. To form her belief, she relies on a number of other related moral beliefs (e.g. the belief that honesty is important, that lying is wrong). Mary's belief that she should not lie to her colleague is integrated into her complex web of moral beliefs. I take the Explanatory View to agree with this on their own terms: "Once you have grasped the importance of not deceiving others and you can draw the conclusion that it is wrong to tell a lie simply for your own benefit, for example, you understand why it is wrong to lie" (Hills 2010, 193). Mary appreciates the reasons why she should not lie, and we assume that she has moral understanding.

Appreciating moral reasons, according to Hills, is intimately tied to explanatory abilities: "Your ability to draw the right conclusion or give the right explanation […] is explained by your appreciation of the reasons why p" (Hills 2010, 193). Appreciation of the reasons why p is tied to the relation between one's grasp of "the importance of not deceiving others," the conclusion one draws, and what one can explain. I agree with Hills that moral understanding entails a grasp of the importance of moral considerations, which is what I take appreciating moral reasons to consist in. I think we can also accept that once one appreciates the reasons why p, one is often in a position to explain why p. Notice, however, that appreciation is what explains why one can explain. Appreciation is primary. As such, the relevant explanatory abilities are, if anything, secondary in terms of the epistemic abilities a moral agent develops. Although the relevant explanatory abilities can bolster one's moral epistemic competence, we have reasons to accept that they are not necessary to have moral understanding. Let us compare Mary to the example of an inarticulate moral exemplar to drive the point home.[66] Consider the example of Denise:

[66] Sliwa (2017, Section V), raises a similar objection toward the Explanatory Account. The insistence on explanatory abilities conflates, she argues, the fact of having moral understanding and the ability to articulate it.

> Denise is honest, but not to a fault. For instance, Denise might lie to her grandchildren if it is necessary to protect them from danger. She is kind. For instance, she often welcomes other villagers in her home, listens to them, does not judge them, shows concern for their worries. She is fair. For instance, she works hard to help integrate newcomers in their village, despite persisting xenophobia, and strongly opposes discriminatory behavior. Denise shows a complex grasp of ethical situations, she engages with new ethical questions, and does not rely on the word of others to figure her way through ethical life. Denise, however, cannot explain why what she does is right, she cannot make substantial distinctions when taking part in a discussion, nor can she rigorously follow explanations. When people ask her for advice, Denise carefully considers the question, and then says what she would do were she in that person's situation: "I'd be you, you know, I'd go on help that poor lad," but she does not provide explanations. At best, we could say that she explains, so to speak, in doing it herself. She stands as an example from which others can learn. In this sense, we can say that Denise can teach others something significant about ethical life, but she does it by doing it herself.

Denise is inarticulate, but she has moral understanding. She has a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what she should do. These, as we can recall from Section 1, are two intuitions guiding our attempt to characterize moral understanding. *Articulacy*—which I take to be necessary to give explanation—is not necessary for understanding. Thus, I take it that the explanatory abilities are not necessary to have moral understanding. Catherine Elgin makes a similar argument in her discussion of understanding simpliciter. In a number of cases of understanding, as she points out, an ability—that does not suppose articulacy—is necessary to understand:

> A mechanic's understanding of carburetors or a composer's understanding of counterpoint is no less epistemically significant for being inarticulate. Even a physicist's understanding of her subject typically outstrips her words. [Rather, understanding] is realized in her framing of problems, her design and execution of experiments, her responses to research failures and successes, and so on (Elgin 1996, 123).

Denise's epistemic competence is similar to that of a competent mechanic, composer or physicist. Their understanding enables them to do something successfully, without having to explain it.

Defenders of the Explanatory View might reply that Denise must at least have the abilities needed to draw conclusions—abilities 3 and 4 (recall the six relevant explanatory abilities from Section 1). She might be missing abilities 1, 2, 5, and 6, the four abilities needed to give an explanation, but she does not lack all of the relevant explanatory abilities. Is this the case? Let us imagine that Denise's son calls her in a panic one day because he cannot arrive on time to pick up his children from school. Without hesitation Denise tells him not to worry, that

she will pick them up and come help him with the children tonight. Here is a possible description of the moral (and non-moral) beliefs which support her quick decision:

> Denise understands that she has reasons to help her son. She can see that he has been working more than is healthy in the past weeks, he is tired, and that this makes it difficult for him to attend to his children's needs with the proper attention and patience they deserve. Denise understands that she is a key person in her son's life, especially because he is a single parent, and that she can provide him with help. She feels responsible to care for her loved ones and promote for them an environment where they feel safe and one in which they can flourish. In general, Denise recognizes the importance of love and care for human life, both for her loved ones and humans in general.

Denise obviously has, despite her inarticulacy, an elaborate web of moral beliefs that guide how she lives. She is able to pay attention to a situation, reflect upon it, imagine what one needs, decide what needs to be done—sometimes as a result of long reflection, sometimes very quickly. It is fair to say that Denise *can* draw conclusions. Denise does not provide explanations but shows that she has moral understanding in how she acts and, more generally, in how she lives. She draws conclusions on the basis of her moral beliefs about what it is right to do in different situations. Drawing the right conclusions, it is relevant to point out, is also the ability which Mary, as far as we know, displays. Let us compare the description of Denise's moral beliefs to that of Mary:

> Mary "believes that she has moral reasons not to lie because lying to others fails to respect them and in the long run tends to make them unhappy. She can see that there are differences between lying and not telling the whole truth. She thinks that lying for your own benefit is normally wrong, but it is harder to say whether lying to someone in a way that makes her happy is ever acceptable, and this may depend on the exact circumstances of the case. She can apply these beliefs to new situations and judge which action is morally right." (Hills 2009, 98–99)

This description informs us about Mary's beliefs and how these relate to her actions. It informs us that she can draw conclusions, but nothing more. We do not know, from this description, whether Mary can proficiently explain why her actions are right. Mary can believe that she has moral reasons not to lie, while being at a loss to explain them. Mary and Denise have similar webs of moral beliefs that relate in a similar way to their actions.

Denise, importantly, and although she is inarticulate, is in a very different moral epistemic position than Sarah who generally[67] relies on the words of her parents to form her moral beliefs. Denise cannot, for instance, explain in her own words why lying is wrong, but she can draw distinctions between different situations and draw practical conclusions which directly influence how she lives. With this I take it that abilities 1, 2, 5, and 6—following and providing explanation—are not necessary to have moral understanding. What to make of abilities 3 and 4—that is, the abilities needed to draw conclusions? Abilities 3 and 4 are important epistemic abilities for moral competence. In fact, Professor C., despite her explanatory abilities, precisely lacks the ability to draw the right conclusions: that is, to form beliefs about what she should do—conclusions which Denise would have formed were she in the same situation as Professor C. Denise displays cognitive abilities that make her a competent, even excellent, moral agent. Given her moral understanding, despite her inarticulacy, we can accept that abilities to explain are not necessary to have moral understanding, although drawing a practical conclusion about what one should do is.

Conclusion

I argued in this chapter that the explanatory abilities, put forth by the Explanatory Account of moral understanding, are not the abilities characteristic of this competence. The relevant explanatory abilities, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are neither sufficient nor necessary to have moral understanding. To defend this, I argued that one can be proficient with regard to the relevant explanatory abilities, while nevertheless importantly lacking moral understanding: the Insufficiency Objection. The case of Professor C. was intended to show that one can be explanatorily proficient, while not meeting two intuitions that an account of moral understanding should be able to accommodate (see Section 1): a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do. This lack was revealed by Professor C.'s indifference toward a moral question about which she should have been concerned. Cases like Professor C. can be explained, as I further argued, by the fact that the reasons provided in a moral explanation can be both identified and appreciated. To have moral understanding, one needs to appreciate the complex ways in which moral considerations relate to one's actions. I subsequently argued that appreciation of moral reasons takes place through a kind of experience. This experience bridges theoretical moral beliefs with practical life by inducing

[67] I say "generally" because it seems wrong to think that young children cannot form their own moral beliefs at all. I once heard of a four-year-old child who, upon seeing her mother being violently handled by her husband, said that she should get a divorce.

one to form a self-engaging moral belief. Appreciation is a necessary condition to have moral understanding and is what Professor C. lacks. I also answered, at this point of the argument, the worry that the notion of appreciation has to do with an agent's motivations. I argued that we need to distinguish between an agent's appreciation and her motivation to act on the reasons which she appreciates. Emotional experience, as I will further develop in Chapter 5, does play a role in appreciation, but it is an epistemic, rather than a motivational one. A moral agent, in other words, can appreciate moral reasons, while lacking the proper motivation to act on those reasons. The case of the weak-willed agent is an example.

One who is competent has the ability (or abilities) to do something successfully. Following the Insufficiency Objection, we gather that the relevant explanatory abilities are not sufficient to have moral understanding. This left open the possibility that those abilities are necessary, in addition to appreciation, to have moral understanding. I argued against this last point in the final section, with the Inarticulacy Objection. One can have moral understanding, while not being able to explain. The example of an inarticulate moral exemplar, who has a systematic grasp of morality and can figure out what she should do, should have driven this point home. However, this last objection did reveal that the abilities to draw conclusions, seeing as they are constitutive of figuring out what one should do, are necessary to have moral understanding.

The discussion in this chapter brings us closer to answering the question with which we were left at the end of Chapter 1: What can a moral agent with moral understanding successfully do? What abilities characterize this competence? If the points I have defended here are correct, then we now know that moral understanding is not an explanatory competence, but that abilities to appreciate are necessary for it. While appreciation implies that one forms a self-engaging moral belief about what one should do—one draws conclusions about what one should do—it does not ensure that one has the *ability* to figure out what one should do. A few serendipitous instances of appreciation do not guarantee that one is constant in the matter. Hence, something else, in addition to appreciation, is needed. Appreciating is necessary, but not sufficient to have moral understanding. If the complementary abilities are not abilities to explain, then what are they, and what kind of competence is moral understanding? In the next chapter, I will argue that moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life. The idea of navigation complies with the two intuitions about what an account of moral understanding should be able to accommodate.

Chapter 3

Moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that moral understanding is not an explanatory competence. Explanatory abilities, with the exception of the ability to draw conclusions, are not necessary to have moral understanding. What can a moral agent who has moral understanding do successfully? We now need an account of this competence that can accommodate the lessons garnered in the two previous chapters. As we can recall from Chapter 1, at the heart of the moral phenomenon supposed to be captured by the notion of moral understanding, there is the intuition that a moral agent can and should do something on her own: the "Do it yourself" clause. It is often assumed that what she can *do* is form the right moral beliefs (or gain moral knowledge). While forming moral beliefs oneself (or gaining moral knowledge) is a result of one's good moral understanding, what is essential to this moral epistemic competence is not just reaching this epistemic achievement, but that one *is engaged* in reaching such achievements. One could, as we can recall, form the right moral beliefs by relying on one's private moral guru. One would thereby, however, not be exercising one's moral understanding and would be abdicating one's moral agency. One who has moral understanding engages epistemically with moral questions to form the right beliefs and one should have the humility, as the second clause stipulated, to ask for the help of other epistemic peers along the way. As we can recall from Chapter 2, an account of moral understanding should also accommodate the intuition that this competence implies something like a systematic grasp of morality and the ability to figure out what one should do. One who appreciates moral reasons has a systematic grasp of morality. This appreciation is necessary, but not sufficient to have moral understanding. A form of *epistemic engagement,* which gives one the ability to figure out what one should do, in addition to one's appreciation of moral reasons, is what is necessary for one to have moral understanding.

In this chapter, I argue that moral understanding is an epistemic competence whereby one is able to successfully navigate ethical life. As we will see, the notion of navigation can accommodate the conditions established in the previous chapters. I will argue, in Section 1, that the competence to navigate ethical life is characterized by the abilities to be epistemically

engaged and to appreciate moral reasons. One who navigates works toward a destination (from point A to point B). This destination, I argue, is to promote ethical values that support a good life. Given that there are multiple ways of living well, appreciation needs to be facilitated through humble epistemic engagement, an epistemic ability supported by a number of other epistemic abilities such as doubting, exploring, imagining possibilities, etc. It will become clearer why epistemic engagement and appreciation are necessary for this kind of navigation as we consider, in Section 2, what it means to lack moral understanding. I argue that there are two significantly different ways of lacking moral understanding. The first, ordinary lack of moral understanding is in cases where one's appreciation is compromised by one's lack of epistemic engagement. The second, failed moral agency is in cases where one's appreciation is compromised because one does not navigate to support a good life. In both cases, navigation fails, but the former deficiency, as opposed to the latter, can be remedied.

The account of moral understanding I suggest here remains as yet only a sketch. However, even at this stage, it provides the means to answer the questions with which I started this inquiry: How are we to understand the idea of having or lacking moral understanding? What is moral understanding? Why do moral agents lack such understanding? Can such deficiencies take different forms? One lacks moral understanding when one's competence to navigate ethical life is compromised. Given their deep ethical concerns, ordinary moral agents, unlike failed moral agents, can remedy their deficits of moral understanding. One of the questions we are left with, at the end of this chapter, is the following: Why does ordinary ethical navigation sometimes fail?

1. Navigating ethical life

One who has moral understanding is able to navigate ethical life successfully. I argued in Chapter 1 that outsourcing one's moral understanding is a moral problem because it is constitutive of moral agency to be engaged at the epistemic level. I would now like to substantiate this claim by drawing on the idea of navigation.[68] Navigating ethical life is an

[68] Metaphors related to navigation—having direction, orientation— are also used within other accounts of moral understanding. Hills (2010) argues that one who has moral understanding, as opposed to one who has little or none, is appropriately oriented. In this context, 'orientation' is proper responsiveness to moral reasons. Hills argues that forming moral beliefs based on appropriate orientation involves exercising one's moral understanding. The difference between this 'orientation' and what I name 'navigation', is that for Hills, moral understanding is a necessary constituent of good orientation, it is as she writes "being a moral compass" (2010, 204). Whereas I argue that moral understanding is not just a navigator's instrument—a compass—but it the whole of the competence. I argue that moral understanding is the competence to carry out this successful navigation; it is the competence to navigate. What is similar between both accounts is the claim that appropriate relation to moral reasons is tied to this orientation or navigation.

epistemic competence whereby one has the ability (or abilities) to recognize and relate different—at first seemingly unrelated—non-moral and moral considerations in terms of their relevance to pursue a certain goal. The necessary conditions to successfully navigate are, first, to be engaged epistemically with humility. This condition is a junction of the "Do it yourself" and the "Have the humility to ask for help" clauses. The second necessary condition is to appreciate moral reasons. If one of these conditions is missing, then one's competence is compromised, and one therefore lacks moral understanding. I will discuss the question of deficits of moral understanding in Section 2. Moral understanding does not exhaust moral competence. Having good motives and knowing how to carry out the necessary moral actions are also necessary to be morally competent (one needs, for instance, to understand that one should help a colleague, to be motivated to do it, and to know how to help). Moral understanding is one of the constitutive parts of moral competence. Let me illustrate by way of a comparison with another competence. A competent alpinist generally reaches the summit she sets herself as a goal. Summiting is what she successfully *accomplishes*. The *competence* that allows this accomplishment involves skills to navigate alpine terrain, technical skills (e.g. making knots, rope coiling, ice axe manipulation), the necessary physical strength, endurance, and motivation. The alpinist's abilities to navigate alpine terrain (e.g. reading the map, identifying routes across glaciers, keeping away from snow ledges and crevasses, paying attention to cloud patterns, etc.) are one aspect of her competence as an alpinist. Similarly, a competent moral agent, in addition to motivation and know-how, needs to be able to navigate, we could say metaphorically, *ethical terrain*. To navigate, one needs epistemic engagement and appreciation.

Navigating is making one's way in a direction. It is something we *do* to find our way: "When we navigate in a new environment, we are required to pay attention to our surroundings and to update our position using our own internal navigation system in order to reach our destination" (Dahmani and Bohbot 2020, 1). Navigation is a competence whereby one goes about one's environment in order to reach a *destination*. The alpinist navigates to reach a summit. One navigates Italian roads to reach Rome. If we accept the analogy with spatial navigation, then there is a destination toward which a moral agent works her way.[69] We might say that this destination is the general goal toward which a moral agent works her way—a goal

[69] The notion of navigation is generally used to refer to spatial navigation (navigating alpine terrain, roads, the sea, etc.). In as much as spatial navigation demands that the agent mobilize a number of cognitive abilities (memory, attention, etc.) to reach a destination, I believe the metaphor is suitable for ethical terrain. On the cognitive abilities mobilized by spatial navigation, see Ekstrom et al. 2018.

in relation to which one's moral experience, moral reflection, moral beliefs, and moral motivations organize themselves and cohere. This goal is the destination. Moral understanding is necessary to work toward that goal—the better moral understanding one has, the better positioned one is to reach the destination.

To understand the nature of this goal, we can consider a comparison with a practical field. A plumber, for instance, when she assesses that she *should* turn off a specific leak, the "should" relates to the goal of repairing a particular plumbing system, but repairing a particular system furthers the general goal of providing functional plumbing. Similarly, if moral understanding is thought of as a competence, then, to put it in the words of Julia Annas, "its object is global—namely, your life as a whole" (Annas 2001, 246).[70] If the goal of plumbers is to provide functional plumbing and they apply their understanding in particular situations to further this general goal, then a moral agent's goal is to provide certain goods in particular situations that support life as a whole. A moral agent navigates complex ethical terrain to promote values that support a good life. The goal, we might say, is that of *living well.* Within a good life, social beings, like human beings, cultivate values like care, fairness, friendship, justice, kindness, respect, and so on. Understanding the importance these values bear in relation to human life is tied to understanding how they relate to one's agency. A competent moral agent is animated by *deep ethical concerns* that align with these ethical values and guide her navigation. Aristotle famously relied on a metaphor of marine navigation to describe the way to reach equilibrium between two vices, i.e. to cultivate the virtues necessary to live well: "That is why it is also hard work to be excellent. For in each case it is hard work to find the intermediate; for instance, not everyone, but only one who knows, finds the midpoint in a circle. […] That is why anyone who aims at intermediate must first of all steer clear of the most contrary extreme, following the advice that [Circe] also gives: 'Hold the ship outside the spray and surge" (*NE* 1109a25-33).

Navigating ethical life in relation to the goal of living well is like recognizing considerations that can enable one to carry out any complex goal (e.g. navigating alpine terrain, repairing a plumbing system, finding one's way on threatening seas). Although the structure is the same, goals set by moral considerations are of deep importance. Competent moral agent appreciate moral considerations in light of their deep ethical concerns; if they do not have deep ethical concerns, then appreciation cannot take place. If one, for instance, does not value

[70] In this paper, Julia Annas defends a view of moral knowledge as a form of understanding that is related to our life as a whole. Understanding, for instance, what courage is, is related to our understanding of how to live as a whole.

justice, then an unfair situation cannot be appreciated as such. The importance of a particular situation cannot be appreciated if one is not generally concerned by this value. This is not to say that situations exemplify certain moral considerations because the agent values them. Rather, moral considerations can come to speak to an agent—their normative character can be revealed—because they somehow figure within this agent's radar; they figure as the kind of thing this person is disposed to answer to. We might say, to use a simpler example, that someone who loves chocolate is more likely to spot a chocolate shop down the street than someone who does not like chocolate. One who is indifferent to chocolate, so to speak, is less likely to notice a chocolate shop. Similarly, one's deep ethical concerns dispose one to appreciate the moral considerations one meets along the way because promoting these values figures as a destination for that agent. Deep ethical concerns structured around the general idea of living well set destinations for a moral agent.

Navigating ethical life differs from, for instance, navigating one's way to Rome, in that the destination is multiply realizable. The destination, that is, is not unique and is never final. There are a number of ways to live well and to promote values that support a good life. There is not just one way to get it right, nor is there only one road to follow. We have said, since Chapter 1, that moral understanding is something one does oneself. Appreciating, as it is grounded in experience, is something one does oneself; it cannot be outsourced. Given, however, that there are multiple ways to live well, one not only needs to appreciate for one's successful navigation; one also needs to be epistemically engaged to facilitate appreciation. A competent moral agent should be able to navigate complex moral terrain without constantly follow a guide. However, given the complexity of ethical terrain, one also has to have the humility to ask for help. In Chapter 1, as I introduced this clause, following the optimists' claim, I focused it around the idea of relying on the help of other epistemic peers. However, the need for humility extends beyond reliance on one's peers. One's navigation needs to be conducted with a humble epistemic engagement in general, otherwise one will find oneself, like Mr. Gradgrind (from the introduction), being led astray by one's over-confidence in the route one has taken. I discuss the example of Mr. Gradgrind in Section 2. For now, we want a better idea of how this epistemic engagement takes place.

Epistemic engagement is, generally, the ability not to shut oneself into a unique system of beliefs to guide one's navigation. It is humble in so far as humility is necessary to recognize that one does not "know" and should engage. I take humility to be the ability of maintaining a realistic attitude toward one's epistemic merits. It is not underestimation, like some accounts of humility or modesty have it, but correct assessment of what one knows and

acknowledgement of the difficulty of knowing or of forming true beliefs.[71] This ability is supported by a number of other epistemic abilities such as doubting, exploring, imagining possibilities, inquiring, questioning, taking another's perspective, and so on. One who is epistemically engaged thus explores, imagines possibilities, inquires, questions, etc. to situate oneself within ethical terrain. This humble exploration allows one to be in contact with the relevant moral considerations such that one forms the right moral beliefs to live well.

One is engaged epistemically, as I suggested in Chapter 1, in the way one encounters and gathers (moral and non-moral) information about the world or in the way one is attentive to moral situations, or in the way one seeks to relate general moral principles to particular moral situations. One ponders a question or situation, doubts oneself, inquires, debates, weighs reasons, goes back and forth between options (What should I tell them? Who should we choose? Is this wrong? What should I do? Should I lie to protect her? Was this really unfair? Was he hurt? Is this the right way?). Different considerations (whether moral or non-moral) often at first seems unrelated. One who can navigate successfully acknowledges and relates different—sometimes quite eclectic—non-moral and moral considerations together in terms of their importance to live well. One who can navigate is able to draw the relevant connections between these different morally relevant items. For instance, upon noticing a colleague's wounded expression, one realizes that a supposedly funny comment was actually hurtful and apologizes to them. This draws the profile of a moral agent who is curious and open-minded, and who is humble with regard to her moral knowledge and epistemic abilities. This moral agent seeks new moral knowledge, engages in discussions with her moral epistemic peers (e.g. listens to what others have to say, discusses difficult questions, etc.), trusts her moral experience, but asks for moral advice, while not delegating her moral responsibility to others. This is the portrait of a *humble moral explorer*. Although I believe this ability is supported by a number of other epistemic abilities, there is an attentional activity that I will focus on, as one of the key abilities on which this humble epistemic engagement relies. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

A competent moral agent, like a competent alpinist or plumber, need not explicitly have her goal in mind; perhaps one never explicitly formulates that goal for oneself. A competent alpinist navigates alpine terrain to climb summits, one at a time, but her competence

[71] There is a debate about the nature of humility, its relation to doxastic attitudes and to virtue. See Bommarito 2018).

exemplifies in every situation the abilities necessary to climb mountains well.[72] Similarly, a competent moral agent understands what is necessary to promote a good human life, one particular moral situation at a time. One might reflect about what is necessary to live well when faced with a particularly stringent question—"Should I really be generous with him although he shows such indolence and ingratitude? Why should I be generous? What does it promote?" However, we might think that explicit reflection on the general goal one is furthering in every particular moral action is seldom part of an agent's moral navigation. A moral agent lives by the general idea of furthering what promotes a good human life, but navigates every particular situation individually with the concerns proper to that particular situation (e.g. one helps one's son because he needs help, not to further the goal of living well).

Some might worry that my comparison between ethical navigation and techniques drives my account back to explanations— precisely what I have rejected in the previous chapter. Some might say, as Linda Zagzebski argues, that "the person who has mastered a techne understands the nature of the product of the techne and is able to explain it" (Zagzebski 2001, 241). Zagzebski suggests that this holds, for instance, for the understanding that a baker or a pianist have of their craft. A techne is a practical field where one successfully produces the art characteristic of this field. We should be careful, however, not to reduce the competency one gains when one understands a subject (or craft) to the competency to *teach* said subject (or craft). We need to distinguish between what it is to be a competent baker or civil engineer from what it is to be a competent teacher of such professions. Indeed, a good teacher can successfully explain the subject she understands, but not everyone who understands her subject well is good at teaching it. Even if one is a competent baker or civil engineer, whether they can successfully explain their craft is an *additional competence* that their understanding makes possible and not a necessary condition for it—the successful production of their craft (e.g. baking good macarons and soufflés, building a bridge), however, is a necessary condition. Explanation is perhaps an obvious way to manifest one's understanding of a theory (e.g. theory of evolution), but it is less relevant, as I argued in Chapter 2, in cases where practical achievements are expected and inarticulacy does not impoverish the competence. Hence, although navigating ethical life is more intricate than repairing a plumbing system, the idea is nevertheless that some are more competent than others at doing it—some are apprentices, some are competent,

[72] This does not exclude that one has as an explicit goal of being an excellent alpinist. Only, I do not think being competent and working toward excellence requires that this goal be continuously present to one's mind.

some are masterful. There are also cases where one does not even qualify as having the competence.

I argued in this section that we can think of moral understanding as a competence to navigate ethical life. This view accommodates the conditions to have moral understanding we drew from previous chapters. While the account just articulated remains a sketch at this stage, it nevertheless provides a framework with which we can now work to clarify what it means for one to lack moral understanding. In the following section, I argue that there are two significantly different ways in which one's navigation can fail.

2. Lacking moral understanding: compromised appreciation and failed navigation

Considering that moral understanding is a competence, is there a threshold under which one simply lacks the competence and above which, while one is competent, one is not an expert? Answering this question will allow us to spell out what it means for one to lack moral understanding. The apprentice plumber works to understand her craft better, at some point she is competent enough to practice on her own (even if she still makes mistakes) and perhaps eventually becomes expert. But one does not need to be an expert to be competent. I have argued that epistemic engagement and appreciation are necessary to have moral understanding. As such, someone can lack moral understanding (be less competent or incompetent) either because of a lack of epistemic engagement or because of a lack of appreciation. In such cases, one is less successful at navigating ethical life; one's competence to navigate ethical life is compromised. To see this, let us first consider two forms of lack of moral understanding.

We can recall from Chapter 2 that one appreciates moral reasons if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations and forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do. When one lacks appreciation, one lacks moral understanding. There are, moreover, two ways in which one can come to lack appreciation:

1) One can lack appreciation of particular moral situations because one is not engaged epistemically. The lack of engagement sustains the lack of appreciation with regard to particular situations.

2) One can lack appreciation because one does not pursue the goal of living well. This is a general lack of moral understanding.

The first case is *ordinary lack of moral understanding*; it concerns, that is, ordinary moral agents. In this case, moral agents have some moral understanding, but they face shortcomings. The second case is *failed moral agency.* In such a case, a lack of appreciation is sustained

because one fails to be a moral agent. This is incompetence: it falls under the threshold one needs to meet to even be able to navigate ethical life. While both forms present a lack of appreciation, they present very different difficulties. To understand these two forms of lack of moral understanding and their specific difficulties, I need to introduce distinctions between *ordinary* moral agents, *failed* moral agents, and *virtuous* moral agents.

What is a moral agent? I take an *agent* to be one who is capable of moving toward a goal by responding to the features of the environment that can further that goal, by deliberating when necessary, and by making choices about their actions. For instance, when Ian takes the shortest route, while cycling to work, to make it on time for a meeting, he is exercising agency. When he is blown off his bike by a strong gust of wind, he is not exercising agency. We generally take agents to be capable of being responsible for their actions. A distinctly *moral* agent pursues goals related to morality—cycling to work is not a moral goal, but honoring an engagement toward one's colleague is.[73] As I suggested above, we might take living well as the goal in relation to which a moral agent's other goals and actions align. For instance, being fair, doing one's duty, being generous, caring for one's children are goals and moral actions that promote living well. In this respect, a moral agent is one who can recognize considerations in (dis)favor of living well. Virtuous agents always have good moral understanding; ordinary moral agents sometimes do, sometimes not. There are people, however, who are failed moral agents. Failed moral agents differ from ordinary and virtuous moral agents because they do not pursue the goal of living well. In this respect, they lack moral understanding at a fundamental level.

2.1 Ordinary lack of moral understanding

Ordinary moral agents generally have moral understanding, but they experience shortcomings. Ordinary moral agents lack moral understanding if, despite having the ability to appreciate moral reasons, their lack of epistemic engagement keeps moral considerations concealed from them. These agents sometimes, that is, fail to recognize certain moral situations as moral situations or fail to recognize what particular situations demand. They are thus not in contact with moral considerations and cannot experience their importance. This impedes their navigation because it prevents them from forming the right beliefs. The beliefs which they fail to form are, in this case, particular beliefs about a moral situation (e.g. "that this person suffers,"

[73] I take this description of moral agency to be sufficiently basic to be uncontroversial and to be sufficient to make my point. There is, of course, a rich literature on the topic of moral responsibility. See for instance Tiberius (2015, Part IV) or Fischer and Ravizza (1998).

"that this joke was disrespectful") *and* a self-engaging belief about what one should do. Lacking the first kind of beliefs, they cannot form the second. In Chapter 2, throughout the discussion on appreciation, I claimed that one who has moral understanding forms a self-engaging belief. It now becomes clearer that being able to form *both* kinds of belief is necessary to have moral understanding. If some beliefs about the relevant particular details of a moral situation are lacking, then one's navigation fails. To better clarify this form of lack of moral understanding, let me first explain what I mean by *ordinary moral agents*, then I will come back to the example of Mr. Gradgrind, with which I started this work, as an illustration of ordinary lack of moral understanding.

Ordinary moral agents are generally good-willed people, engaged in an ethical and political community. They generally want to live well with others and are concerned to cultivate values like care, fairness, friendship, justice, kindness, respect, and so on. To put it in the words of Margaret Urban Walker, they are "motivated by the aim of going on together, preserving or building self- and mutual understanding in moral terms" (Walker 2007, 71). To illustrate this with examples I have relied on thus far in this work, we might say that Mr. Gradgrind, his daughter Louisa, Mary, Peter, Jessie, Anna, and Denise are ordinary moral agents (although Denise, as a moral exemplar, is the most competent of the lot). They are agents, as Marie Garrau writes, "situated in a particular context and concerned by the particular relations in which they [as subjects] are embedded" (Garrau 2014, 45, my translation). They are not individuals diagnosed with a condition (such as psychopathy), which affects their ethical capacities, nor are they immoral or amoral individuals, albeit without a particular condition (I come to these distinctions in the next section). Ordinary moral agents are not virtuous either.

A virtuous moral agent does everything well—she is the *most* competent one. In a virtuous moral agent, right desires and right beliefs come together so that she reliably does what is right, according to Aristotle. This means that she recognizes what is good in general, desires to do what is good, recognizes what promotes the good in particular situations, and is motivated to do these particular actions.[74] As we can recall from Chapter 2, I argued that appreciation is not a form of motivation. Some desires, as I can now make clearer, nevertheless are a precondition of appreciation. The desire to live well is necessary to have appreciation.

[74] The fact that there are two kinds of desires involved in moral action is often overlooked. The first is desire for the good and comes as the agent recognizes the good intellectually through her understanding (*nous*). As Aristotle writes: "[An unqualified goal is] what we achieve in action, since acting well is the goal, and desire is for the goal. That is why decision is either understanding combined with desire or desire combined with thought […]" (*NE* 1139b3–5).

Desires to live well, a moral agent's deep ethical concerns, as I put it in Section 1, are not constitutive of appreciation, but are a necessary precondition to experience the importance of moral considerations. They are not desires to act on particular cases. One can have the desire to live well, while lacking motivation in some particular cases, as is the case for the weak-willed agent. Weakness of will is another shortcoming of moral agency that is specific to ordinary moral agents. It is similar, in that respect, to ordinary lack of moral understanding, but occurs at the motivational, as opposed to the epistemic, level. As I argued in Chapter 2, both the weak-willed and strong-willed have appreciation, but experience conflicting desires. Weakness of will and strength of will are defects characteristic of ordinary moral agents. The weak-willed does not act on the moral reasons she appreciates, whereas the strong-willed does so after a battle between desires—the desire to live well triumphs. The comparison between ordinary motivational shortcomings and ordinary epistemic shortcomings serves to illustrate the idea that ordinary moral agents can lack moral understanding despite their desire to live well, just as one can be weak-willed despite having a desire to live well. In keeping with the attribution of weakness of will to describe this familiar motivational shortcoming, we might qualify the epistemic shortcoming I am discussing as *weakness of wit*.

What, more precisely, does ordinary lack of moral understanding consist in? As we can gather from the example of Mr. Gradgrind, despite desiring to live well, he lacks something of great moral importance. Mr. Gradgrind lacks a number of moral beliefs because he lacks epistemic engagement. He fails to successfully navigate ethical life—in this case, to provide the love and care that his daughter needs.[75] Mr. Gradgrind does not explore, does not doubt his ways, does not question his assumptions about what his daughter needs. He also does not feel the kind of emotions that might have guided him. Mr. Gradgrind deeply wishes to give his daughter the best possible life, but his attempts, until the moment of the pivotal scene I retold in the introduction, do not bring him to the destination.

Gradgrind does not understand what his daughter needs. Too see this, we can start with the system he so fiercely defends. As Louisa tells him: "All I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me" (Dickens 2012, 242). Gradgrind presents us with a stark example of someone who fails to engage epistemically with moral questions because he has built for himself a system within which questions are to be dealt, leaving no room (he believes)

[75] Another literary work that presents a character with a similarly flagrant lack of epistemic engagement is Mrs. Newsome in Henry James's 1903 novel *The Ambassadors*. Martha Nussbaum's (1990) discussion, in "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," of the contrast between the moral outlooks of Mrs. Newsome and Mr. Strether, who is confronted, even forced, to open himself to new perspectives during his travels away from her, testifies to the kind of understanding that is lost when one remains enclosed in one's own moral views.

for mistakes, and especially no room for change: "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. […] This is the principle on which I bring up my own children […]" (Dickens 2012, 3). Gradgrind raises his children and educates the children of the school he directs according to the principles of his air-tight system. This system is ruler and master:

> "Thank you, sir. I have thought sometimes"; Sissy very timid here; "that perhaps I tried to learn too much, and that if I had asked to be allowed to try a little less, I might have—"
> "No, Jupe, no," said Gradgrind, shaking his head in his profoundest and most eminently practical way. "No. The course you pursued, you pursued according to the system—the system—and there is no more to be said about it." (Dickens 2012, 102)

Gradgrind's example is most relevant to illustrate the kind of moral shortcoming I press us to recognize because he is, in a number of ways, an active moral agent. He faces moral questions. He does not, for instance, outsource his moral decisions to others. He also actively contributes to his ethical community. For instance, by being involved in the local school despite being himself an industrialist. *Doing* all this, however, he solely relies on the system of thought he has devised and accepted as truth.[76] Once Louisa forces him to acknowledge the limits of his system, we are better positioned to appreciate the shortcomings of moral agency he had presented up to that point, and that Gradgrind is brought to appreciate by his daughter. He was given ample opportunities earlier to see the plight of his daughter, but his appreciation had been compromised because he had locked himself up in his system:

> From the beginning, she had sat looking at him fixedly. As he now leaned back in his chair, and bent his deep-set eyes upon her in his turn, perhaps he might have seen one wavering moment in her, when she was impelled to throw herself upon his breast, and give him the pent-up confidences of her heart. But, *to see it*, he must have overleaped at a bound the artificial barriers he had for many years been erecting, between himself and all those subtle essences of humanity […] The barriers were too many and too high for such a leap. (Dickens 2012, 111, my emphasis)

One needs to feel to appreciate, but Gradgrind's barriers do not allow him to feel certain emotions. He can feel, for sure. He feels, for instance, disappointment about the fact that Sissy does not live up to the system. The problem is not just that Gradgrind does not form the right beliefs. It is also not just that he does not feel certain emotions. The problem is that he is not epistemically engaged: he does not leap over the barriers. The many opportunities given to him

[76] See also Martha Nussbaum's excellent discussion of Gradgrind's system in *Poetic Justice*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.

before the paramount moment when Louisa awakes him are not made visible to him. As I have said in Section 1, an epistemically engaged moral agent inquires, observes, is curious and open-minded about concerns of ethical life. She is humble with regard to her moral knowledge and epistemic abilities. One's lack of such an engagement, like Gradgrind's, sustains a lack of appreciation with respect to particular situations.

The ordinary lack of moral understanding is no less serious because of its ordinariness. I draw this distinction to emphasize two points. First, despite the seriousness, we should, like Louisa—who says to her father "I don't reproach you father. What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself" (Dickens 2012, 239)—approach such lacking in moral understanding with a form of *kindness*. Ordinary moral agents are *trying* to navigate and, in the face of failure, even if those are often frustrating or discouraging, we can often help each other to find the way. We fail, saddle up, and try again. That this is the case is tied to the fact of ordinary moral agents forming an ethical community and what it means to rely on one another in making this community thrive. If Iris Murdoch is right, as I will discuss in the following chapter, to say that these epistemic shortcomings are best understood as shortcomings of vision, one does not shout and rage, or order a blind man, who cannot find his way, what to do. One can only help him feel his way through. Second, and relatedly, there are ways for an ordinary moral agent to cope with her lack of moral understanding. One can, like Gradgrind, come to acknowledge the presence of the relevant moral considerations. Louisa's revelations shake Gradgrind so deeply that he becomes more humble. This humility is key. His over-confidence prevented him from seeking to find out what he was missing out on. Gradgrind had taken his moral experience at face value. He did not question it. Awakened to his shortcomings, he can now be engaged ethically at the epistemic level—guided by humility. My goal in the next chapter is to thematize in greater depth the idea that ordinary moral agents must be epistemically engaged to navigate ethical life. I will argue that an attentional activity counteracts epistemic shortcomings, like those Gradgrind faces, by keeping one open-minded toward and present to particular moral situations.

2.2 Failed moral agency

In contrast to an ordinary moral agent, a failed moral agent is someone who does not understand why morality (and all that it involves) matters. As I said in the previous section, a virtuous moral agent recognizes what is good in general, desires to do what is good, recognizes what promotes the good in particular situations, and is motivated to carry out these particular actions. A failed moral agent, in contrast, lacks the desire to do what is good. Lacking the desire to do what is

good, it is pointless for this person to inquire into what promotes the good in particular situations. Failed moral agents are what Aristotle sees as vicious agents—agents who do not take part in moral practices. At best, they want proof that ethical goals are worth pursuing. They want to be proven, as Glaucon asked Socrates, that the life of the just is better than the life of the unjust. Skeptics who persist with the question "why be moral?" are cases of failed moral agency.[77] Philippa Foot gives, as an illustration of the ridicule this question can provoke, the example of Martians who, despite not being able to talk to humans or read humans' books, study the phenomenon of friendship:

> These Martians would see friendship very much like Plato's immoralist sees justice. In itself acting as a friend is, the Martians suppose, disagreeable […] For the run of humans it is, however, worthwhile for its rewards. Were it possible to get these rewards by gaining the reputation of being a friend without really accepting its duties, that is what any human would seek. (Foot 2001, 102)

Foot's point is that the Martians have failed to understand what friendship actually is for human life: its nature, its importance. A failed agent *fails* to understand at a deeper level because, lacking the desire to live well, she cannot appreciate the importance of values like care, fairness, friendship, justice, kindness, respect, and so on. One can have the desire to live well, while lacking motivation in some particular cases, as is the case for the weak-willed agent. Unlike a weak-willed agent, a failed moral agent is not navigating life with the goal to live well. As such, a failed moral agent is not engaged *as a moral agent*, thus the failed agency. It seems fair to say that cases of failed agency are not common. Those suffering from antisocial personality disorders, especially psychopathy,[78] are clinically studied cases who qualify as failed moral agents. As some have argued, psychopaths lack moral understanding because they are unable to recognize that the values, interests, and emotions of others relate significantly to their own actions (e.g. Duff 1977). An important point of disanalogy stands, however, in contrast to the examples of the alpinist, the baker or the plumber I gave above: unlike someone who does not pursue the goal of being, for instance, a good alpinist, failed moral agents are persons living in a moral community, persons able to consider the worth of their actions, to take responsibility, and so on. They *should*, in other words, pursue the goal of living well. Whether failed moral agents can be held morally responsible is the object of debate precisely, some say, because they

[77] On the different ways to answer this form of moral skepticism, see Tiberius 2015, Chapter 10.
[78] Psychopaths are considered a subgroup amongst individuals classified as having antisocial personality disorder by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorder (DSM IV). The notion was refined by Robert Hare (1991).

lack moral understanding.[79] Whether moral understanding is necessary for an agent to be held morally responsible, as some claim, is outside the scope of this inquiry, whose focus is not on the nature of moral responsibility, but on how moral agents experience themselves, if anything, as responsible.

Failed agents also need to be distinguished from another case of untypical moral agency—which, while it might at first appear to be the same, presents an important difference. The cases I have in mind might be called *false moral agency*. This is what I take Professor C. to be. Professor C. lacks some of the right beliefs (like an ordinary moral agent might lack), but she also lacks the ability to form them. She lacks this latter ability because she does not get the point of our moral practices. However, unlike the immoralist, she does not even argue against them, in an attempt to replace them with another set of values. Professor C. is simply indifferent to structures of importance. Whereas failed moral agents fail to recognize the importance of moral considerations in relation to the goal of living well and, therefore, do not form the right beliefs, false moral agents lack recognition of the importance of moral considerations in relation to the goal of living well, but can form some beliefs that are similar enough in content to those of ordinary or virtuous moral agents, to fit into moral practices. Contrary to an immoralist who might, moreover, have a set of values he or she lives by (the Don, after all, loves his mother), but does not follow ordinary moral practices, the false moral agent succeeds in taking part in our moral practices, like Professor C., but only to a certain extent: these practices remain external to her. An amoralist tailors his or her responses and behaviors on those taking part in these practices to get by. Note that Professor C. would be an ordinary moral agent, if, despite her indifference to sexism, she was otherwise a fair person. However, the example is devised to capture her deeper lack of moral understanding. Professor C. not only fails to recognize the demands of this particular case, but she fails to recognize such demands overall. The difference is crucial because those who would like to bring her to care for or acknowledge the problem first have the task of revealing to her the importance of values like fairness. This task is very different—it might be an impossible task— from that of revealing to an ordinary moral agent that a particular situation is unfair. I further discuss the case of failed and false moral agents in Chapter 5, within the presentation of the role that emotional experiences play in revealing the importance of moral considerations. The impediments of these agents would seem to be their lack of affective life.

[79] About the question whether psychopaths are morally responsible given their lack of moral understanding, see Malatesti 2009. On the question whether having moral understanding is necessary to be held morally responsible, see Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 69–73.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide an account of moral understanding that could accommodate the conditions set forth in the previous chapters: moral understanding is an epistemic competence, whereby one does something oneself with humility and which implies a form of appreciation. I argued that moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life successfully. Navigating ethical life is an epistemic competence whereby one has the ability (or abilities) to recognize and relate different—at first seemingly unrelated—non-moral and moral considerations in terms of their relevance to living well. It is an epistemic competence that matures throughout moral development and is further exercised as one goes about one's mature moral life.

Navigating involves finding one's way; it is a competence characterized, in the ethical case, by the abilities to be epistemically engaged and to appreciate. Abilities to appreciate are guided by, as I argued, deep ethical concerns born out of the general goal of living well. A competent moral agent appreciates moral reasons in light of those deep ethical concerns. Given that there are multiple ways to live well, one needs to be epistemically engaged to facilitate appreciation. Epistemic engagement comes prior to appreciation. Being epistemically engaged means that one does such things as doubting, exploring, questioning one's moral situation. Although this engagement is propped up by a number of other epistemic abilities, one is able to be engaged thus when one has the humility not to shut oneself into a closed or unique system of beliefs to guide one's navigation. With this account in hand, I was then able to argue that one can fail to navigate in two significantly different ways. First, as I suggested, one can lack appreciation of particular moral situations because one is not engaged epistemically. The lack of engagement sustains the lack of appreciation. This is ordinary lack of moral understanding. Second, there are cases where one is incompetent because one does not pursue the goal of living well. In such cases, appreciation is not possible. This lack of competence is failed moral agency. False moral agents are different from failed moral agents, moreover, because the former, unlike the latter, can fit in our moral practices to a certain extent, but they do not understand why we have them.

We needed this discussion to provide answers to the questions with which I started this inquiry: How are we to understand the idea of having or lacking moral understanding? What is moral understanding? Why do moral agents lack such understanding? Can such deficiencies take different forms? Having the account of moral understanding as a competence to navigate in hand, it was necessary to distinguish between cases of ordinary lack of moral understanding

and those of failed moral agency, only to set aside the latter and continue investigating why the former occurs. My central concern in this work is to shed light on cases where people, although well-intentioned, are nevertheless ill-equipped to find their way in ethical life—a good representative of such cases being Mr. Gradgrind. For the rest of this investigation, I focus on further explaining why ordinary moral agents lack moral understanding. This should provide us with the outlines of a much-needed phenomenology of ordinary ethical agency.[80]

The limits of this account lie in the fact that I could only provide a sketch of the competence to navigate. Research on the nature of spatial navigation could be surveyed more comprehensively for us to better specify the role different epistemic abilities play in the competence. Given that attentional abilities and memory functions are central in spatial navigation, we could also gain in the specification of the abilities that most support ethical navigation—are they the same ones? Of course, the abilities I have argued for thus far, although untypical cognitive abilities, give us strong clues that I will pursue in the next two chapters, where I want to give further support to the claim that successful ethical navigation relies on the abilities to be epistemically engaged and to appreciate. Such abilities are themselves enhanced by other epistemic abilities that are, to use the words of Walker, "many and varied, and not necessarily specific to morality. Skills of perception are shaped by learning what to notice and how to attend to it; […] skills of responding appropriately in feeling and behavior by learning where feelings fit and what counts as expressing them" (Walker 2007, 72). For, if Murdoch rightly presses us to acknowledge that one can "only choose within the world that [one] can *see*" (Murdoch 2002, 35–36), the difficulty to see, like Gradgrind's difficulty in seeing his daughter's misery, is brought about by a specific phenomenon Murdoch calls *the ego*. In the next chapter, I consider how the ego sustains epistemic shortcomings, as well as Murdoch's claim that this phenomenon's counterweight is an attentional activity. This discussion should explain why ordinary moral agents, despite their good intentions, face shortcomings and must be epistemically engaged to overcome them. We might also say, given the discussion thus far, that one can only *feel* within the world that one can see. One cannot navigate if one does not feel, but one needs to see before one can feel aright. The attentional activity that will be the topic of the next chapter will thus be a central guide for one's moral experience, to clear the

[80] As opposed, that is, to a phenomenology of *ethical expertise*, as proposed, for instance, by Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1991. I seek to describe here, not the experience of a virtuous moral agent, but the experience of ordinary struggles of moral agency. It is not that the experience of the virtuous agent is irrelevant. This experience has received, since Aristotle, considerable attention. However, seeing as *we* are not virtuous, might we not take the time to meticulously describe the experience of our very real, but imperfect, ordinary moral ways? I take Aristotle to be sensible to this question. His discussion of weakness of will is an effort to describe such experiences and his acknowledgement that virtue is "hard work" (NE 1109a25), acknowledges this ordinary experience.

way for one to feel the right emotions. Chapter 5 then provides a defense of the claim that normative character is made available to one through emotional experience—it substantiates the claim that one needs affective abilities.

Chapter 4

Attending, Epistemic Engagement, and Murdoch's challenge of the ego

> I have in mind moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations "taped," the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with the apprehension of the unique. (Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality", 46)

> We must, therefore, have perception of these particulars, and this perception is understanding. (Aristotle, *NE* 1143b8-9)

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that one who has moral understanding has the competence to successfully navigate ethical life. To navigate ethical life, a moral agent needs the ability to engage epistemically and to appreciate moral reasons. One appreciates moral reasons, as we can recall from Chapter 2, if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations, and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do. Following this account of moral understanding, I argued that ordinary moral agents lack moral understanding when, despite having the ability to appreciate moral reasons, their lack of epistemic engagement leaves moral considerations concealed from them. Seeing moral considerations is necessary to appreciate moral reasons. As such, being epistemically engaged is necessary to appreciate moral reasons and *ipso facto* to avoid an ordinary lack of moral understanding. We now need an account of the nature of the epistemic engagement characteristic of successful ethical navigation. What kind of cognitive ability must a moral agent engage to successfully navigate ethical life? Moreover, why is this engagement necessary?

In this chapter, I argue that "attending"—an attentional activity characteristic of moral agency—is necessary to navigate ethical life. Attending is, in this respect, one of the pillars of epistemic engagement. To argue for this claim, I rely on Iris Murdoch's notion of moral

attention. I first introduce Murdoch's challenge of the ego in Section 1. According to Murdoch, the ego presents moral agents with an epistemic challenge because it constrains experience and thus creates blind spots—parts of reality that remain concealed from one. In Section 1.1, I give examples of how these blind spots occur in moral experience. Murdoch claims, as I present in Section 2, that moral attention counterweighs the ego. If Murdoch is correct about the challenge of the ego, then moral attention should be a necessary tenet of a moral agent's epistemic engagement. To uphold this idea, I analyze the ideas of ego and of moral attention with a contemporary account of attention. This analysis should make the phenomenon named ego relatable and support the claim that a form of attention can counteract the challenges it creates. Before I can proceed to the analysis, I first need, in Section 3, to challenge Murdoch's pessimistic view of the ego. With a more optimistic view of ego in hand, I then argue that it is not *attention*—a mental activity—that Murdoch suggests as a solution to the ego, but rather *attending*—an activity of the moral agent. To defend these claims, from Sections 4 to 6, I draw on Sebastian Watzl's account of attention as an activity of the mind which organizes mental states into structures of significance. Building on this account, I will argue that attending is *attention actively guided with low control*. When attending, a moral agent is active in promoting an attitude which is itself passive. This attitude promotes a form of openness to the world that enables ethically relevant items to enter one's structures of salience, thus counteracting the workings of the ego. Sections 7 and 8 provide further support for the account, as I answer the worries that attending could be misguided and not sufficiently action-guiding.

This discussion provides a novel understanding of the Murdochian notions of ego and moral attention. These notions, in turn, support the idea that epistemic engagement is a key characteristic of competent moral agency. The deleterious effects of the ego explain why, although ordinary moral agents are generally good-willed people and active members of ethical communities, they nevertheless face puzzling moral shortcomings. The analysis of ego provided in this chapter can, for instance, shed light on the way phenomena such as deeply entrenched biases or prejudices guided by ideologies (e.g. classism, racism, sexism, white supremacism, etc.) shape our experience and influence our actions. Attending can counteract these moral shortcomings, so long as those attending have deep ethical concerns. Attending is not an antidote to all moral woes; it will not change the outlooks of those who do not value ethical life to begin with.

1. The challenge of the ego

Moral agents have the challenge of overcoming the ego to see the world *clearly*, according to Iris Murdoch's renowned claim—what I name *the challenge of the ego*.[81] Murdoch's idea is puzzling because we might think that the challenge for moral agents is to *act* rightly, not to *see* rightly. There is, however, such a challenge, according to Murdoch, because "human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life, the enemy is that fat relentless ego" (Murdoch 2002, 51). Murdoch argues that the ego, an underrecognized and undertheorized challenge, reveals that the "inner life" of moral agents, even "the configuration of their thought" is morally relevant (Hepburn and Murdoch 1956, 39). The ego challenges moral agents because it creates a kind of vision problem that sustains moral shortcomings.

The ego sustains moral shortcomings because it shapes the outlook moral agents have on the world:

> By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. […] Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with […] our ability to choose and act. (Murdoch 2002, 82)

The ego is a mental phenomenon that influences how a moral agent sees the world. According to Murdoch, the ego names a continual activity of the mind which presents moral agents with the challenge of overcoming a form of blindness. What we could call *ordinary ethical blind spots*—for the rest of the chapter, unless otherwise specified, I will use simply *blind spots*. The idea of a blind spot is common in navigation. Many, if not all, vehicles have areas around them that cannot be directly observed by the driver while in control of the vehicle—one drives, but one cannot see all the considerations relevant to driving, like a car coming to one's left. The term, moreover, has a broader meaning beyond spatial navigation: a blind spot is also "a subject about which a person is ignorant or prejudiced" ("Blind Spot" 2016). Ignorance and prejudice do not exhaust the sources of blind spots; narrow-mindedness, biases, stereotypes, arrogance, and some emotions (e.g. jealousy, contempt, pride) might also be possible sources. These

[81] Murdoch introduces the idea of *ego* in her essay "On God and Good", as the main impediment to achieve clear view of the (ethical) world. See Murdoch, 2002. The theme has also been discussed elsewhere (Antonaccio 1993; Mole 2007; Panizza 2015, Chapter 6) as that of *unselfing*. The ego thus reflects a certain understanding of the human self, as being prone to fantasy, neurosis, imprisonment into false views. Murdoch pursues her analysis of the problems of ego in "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts" and in some essays of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. But her wariness with the problem of self-centeredness is woven into the whole of her moral philosophy.

different sources of blind spots are, I believe, different faces of the mental phenomenon Murdoch presses us to recognize as a challenge. One has to beware of blind spots (similar to when one is driving) because they affect one's moral competence. Blind spots are areas of moral reality that are concealed from a moral agent and that prevent her from recognizing the moral character of a situation or from recognizing certain moral considerations. This interferes, in turn, with the ability of the moral agent to form the right moral beliefs about particular moral situations. Thus, the blind spots sustained by the ego can explain the ordinary forms of lack of moral understanding presented in Chapter 3. The blind spots sustained by the ego present a challenge because they can interfere with one's navigation.

Two misconceptions we might have of the idea of ego need to be cleared up before proceeding further. First, the challenge of the ego is not the challenge of psychological egoism: the claim that all human actions when properly understood are motivated by selfish desires.[82] Second, the challenge is not to provide the skeptic with reasons to be moral. It is not that of convincing an agent that she has reasons to act morally or to obey universal moral laws. On the contrary, the challenge of the ego addresses moral agents who do not ask themselves "Should I be fair to others," but "Why, despite wanting to be fair, am I sometimes not?" This challenge reveals something about moral agency: that navigating ethical life involves the ability of taking blind spots into account. Precisely, therefore, a virtuous moral agent, who has learned to live with the ego, is not impeded by this mental phenomenon. To better appreciate how the ego sustains blind spots, let us consider some examples.

1.1 Examples of blind spots sustained by the ego

Blind spots can take a number of forms. Mr. Gradgrind, whom we will recall from the previous chapter and the introduction, stands as what I take to be a stark example of a moral agent with such blind spots. I now want to support the idea of blind spots with the following three examples. I first summarily discuss the examples in this section, and I will rely on them to illustrate my argument in the rest of the chapter. Consider, as a first example, Judge S.:

> Judge S. is a friendly person, a well-liked family and community member. She takes her work seriously, considers that she is fair and that fairness is a central tenet of her work. One day, a court case presents Rita, a young indigenous woman, charged for prostitution. A police officer acts as witness against her. Rita pleads not guilty. She tries to defend her case by telling her story. She explains that it was very hard for her to find a job when she came to the city from the indigenous reserve, that she became homeless

[82] About the thesis of psychological egoism see Feinberg 2004.

> because no one would hire her, thus becoming trapped in undesired forms of labor. However, Judge S., rather than making an effort to understand Rita's account, which is emotionally laden and told non-linearly, cannot help but notice Rita's physical appearance which she judges harshly. Judge S. thinks that Rita is dirty and repugnant with her worn-out clothes, that she has bushy hair and needs dental care. Moreover, as Rita speaks, all that Judge S. can pay attention to is her thick accent and her limited vocabulary. After Rita's deposition, Judge S. asks the police officer for her version of the case and accepts her account of the story without hesitation. She declares Rita guilty.[83]

Judge S.'s blind spots are the worth of Rita and the fact that Rita's testimony needs to be given proper weight in the trial. Rita comes from a marginalized group with a documented history of violence and work discrimination. These considerations ask of Judge S. to take the time to understand the circumstances which have brought Rita to stand before her in court in such disarray. We might also say that Judge S. is blind to the fact that she is being unfair in her assessment of the case. She not only misjudges Rita, but she gives full deference to the police officer who is Caucasian like her. There is a tension between citizens coming from different social groups. Rita is indigenous. Judge S. and the police officer are Caucasian. Judge S. rapidly, although unjustifiably, defers to the person from her social group. Judge S. is prejudiced toward indigenous people. Her perception of Rita and, in turn, her evaluation of the case are directed by a number of prejudices she holds about indigenous people. In this example, the ego takes the form of these prejudices. In Murdochian terms, we can say that Judge S.'s prejudices create a falsifying veil, which conceals part of the world from her. Despite Judge S.'s desire to be fair, she does not give Rita a fair trial. The important moral phenomenon in this example is that Judge S.'s prejudices prevent her from forming beliefs about the relevant moral considerations.

Let us consider a second example. The selected excerpt presents the interaction of three men, in 1859, in the fictive Peruvian village of New Bethlehem. Raphael is the priest of the village. As the story unfolds, we gather that he has a deep understanding of human life. This is revealed in the way he helps others, how he welcomes strangers into his home, even the way he speaks. The two other men, Sir Clements Markham and Merrick Tremayne come to Peru on a highly risky expedition to find cinchona trees—trees that are fiercely guarded to maintain the local monopoly—whose bark yields quinine. Their mission is to bring cuttings back to India. Clements is an English anthropologist, well-traveled and highly knowledgeable

[83] This example is an adapted version of the play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by Canadian author George Ryga. I chose this example thanks to Sophie Bourgault's (2020) discussion of the way this play reveals faces of injustices.

about ancient Peruvian cultures. Merrick is an English botanist. In the excerpt, Raphael introduces the foreigners to the religious statues guarding the boundaries of the village. One of the statues makes a blessing toward them with her stone palm:

> "What is it doing?" I asked Raphael.
> I could only try to throw my voice a little towards him, not confident I could turn my head without blurring the picture.
> "Just a benediction. He won't hurt you. It's good. They don't do it to everyone."
> "There must be a counter in the pressure pad," Clem said. "You know: reach out to every fifteenth person who stands there long enough, or whatever. How often is it, have you noticed?
> Of course you haven't," he said when Raphael shook his head. […] "I suppose you wouldn't be amenable to my digging to find the—"
> "Touch that ground and I'll sacrifice you to something made of teeth," Raphael said flatly. […]
> It was hard to see how Clem could have spent so much time in countries like this but never noticed that success or failure depended on being a water boatman, skimming, instead of a diver and getting everyone wet with an enormous splash whenever anything interesting passed through the deep water. Standing near him and Raphael together felt a lot like standing on the banks of a half-holy lake somewhere lost in the mountains, with a St Bernard dead set on winning a swimming medal. (Pulley 2017, 141–42)[84]

There is an important difference between the two foreigners. While they both take high risks in traveling to this remote part of Peru with a clear goal, they are markedly different in how they relate to the people they meet on their journey, especially in New Bethlehem, where they settle for a longer time. On the one hand, Clements is interested, even highly fascinated, by who and what he encounters. Villagers are fascinating objects of research for him, but he does not take time to sit with them, appreciate their views, get to know them. He takes a distant stance and takes notes. He rambles to Merrick—who he takes to be his only equal in intelligence—about what he knows. On the other hand, Merrick develops a bond with Raphael, meets people from the village, is invited for a meal, takes part in a traditional ceremony, etc. Merrick is respectful. He is curious, but withdrawn and humble. Clements is interested, but vulgar and obtrusive, even chauvinistic with his scientific views. We can appreciate these aspects in the excerpt thanks to Merrick's uneasiness. Although they are both foreigners, Clements does not have respect for the people there (their culture, spiritual practices, and ways of life), whereas Merrick does. Clements's blind spots are that he does not recognize the worth and singularity of the villagers as giving him reasons to respect them and their differences and not to turn them paternalistically into a science fair. The comparison with

[84] Natasha Pulley (2017) *The Bedlam Stacks*. Bloomsbury Circus, London and New York.

the St Bernard—an over-excited dog convinced of his talent—allows us to appreciate Clements's clumsy arrogance. The character of Merrick is important in the example to show how a foreigner can respectfully interact with communities very different from him, in contrast to Clements.

Lastly, let us consider, as a third example, Murdoch's famous example of the mother-in-law (M). This example, besides being the one Murdoch devises to illustrate the challenge she presents, is one between relatives. In this respect, it differs from the other two examples that take place between strangers. Proximity can create a different dynamic from that between strangers, and we might think that prejudices, stereotypes or arrogance more easily find their place between the latter than between the former. The M example, however, shows that blind spots can arise in familiar settings, too. This example is also important because it introduces a solution to the blind spots—actions that counter the effects of the ego. Here is the M case:

> A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. […] M feels that her son has married beneath him. […] Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D […] However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again." Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. (Murdoch 2002, 16–17)

M starts with her own idiosyncratic vision of D. M is prejudiced (e.g. "M feels that her son has married beneath him"). However, over time, while D's features do not change, M's *inner thoughts* about D start to shift. M is capable of self-criticism: she gives it another look and tries to see D for what she really is. M's opinion of D becomes more favorable. She appreciates that D does not deserve her negative judgments. Murdoch relies on the mother-in-law example to argue that choices and overt actions are not the only significant forms of moral agency. She argues that M's reassessment of the situation, the time she takes to take a closer look at things with a "careful and just attention" (Murdoch 2002, 17) are morally significant moments of agency—the moments of epistemic engagement I discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

These examples provide insight into the forms that blind spots can take. Murdoch's characterization of the ego and the kind of challenge it presents can shed light on puzzling, although common, moral shortcomings. Note, moreover, that some blind spots are arguably

more serious than others in terms of the moral shortcomings they bring about. Some support forms of discrimination, like racism and sexism, which can—as in the first example—dramatically influence the life of the person being discriminated against. Other forms, like in the other two examples, foster disrespect or arrogance toward others, but do not disrupt the whole of their lives. Let me now present the solution Murdoch has devised for this challenge.

2. Moral attention as a counterweight to the ego

The solution to the ego, Murdoch argues, is *moral attention*.[85] Our experiences can lead us astray; some are states of illusion. The ego, otherwise said, creates the challenge for moral agents to sort out between what becomes of their experience of the world and what *could* become of it. Moral agents should put effort in counteracting states of illusion and attention, Murdoch argues, "is the effort to counteract such states of illusion" (Murdoch 2002, 36). Simone Weil was perhaps the first to argue that a form of attention is central to ethical life. Weil, Murdoch's main influence regarding the role of attention, does not merely argue that one should pay more attention. She argues that *a certain way* of paying attention is key (I come back to her account in Section 6.2). It is key to shift our relation to the world from what is personal toward the sacred or the good.[86] As Weil writes:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object: it means holding in our minds […] the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of […] Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil 2009, 62)

She describes an attentive attitude whereby one is actively doing nothing. One allows oneself to experience the world around one, not working toward a definite goal: "One is confronted with a question or problem and one has the impulse to seek the answer. Attention consists in resisting this impulse and instead 'sitting with' the problem, keeping one's focus upon it but waiting for the solution to present itself" (Clarke 2013, 389). This attentive attitude, characterized by Bridget Clarke as "active receptivity," enables the agent to "get out of her

[85] For further readings about Murdoch's notion of moral attention see Clarke 2013; Panizza 2015; Forthcoming; Gendron 2016; Raïd 2019.
[86] Weil's idea of *personal*, similar to Murdoch's idea of ego, suggests a common way in which humans relate to the world that directs and maintains their attention on trivial matters or self-centered preoccupations and, thus, keeps their attention away from goodness. See the essay "Human Personality" in Weil 1986.

own way so that other things can be appreciated for what they are" (Clarke 2013, 390). This active receptivity is moral attention.

There should be, the assumption is, a certain way to position ourselves, which creates conditions under which important information about the world reliably presents itself under the right light. The relevant information is varied: non-moral and non-evaluative (e.g. one's pain, one's unease, crispation in one's face, the direction of one's gaze), evaluative and non-moral (e.g. a grateful smile, a beautiful gesture, an arrogant comment, a close-minded attitude), moral (e.g. a blatant injustice, the cruelty of a practice, a courageous stance, a person suffering, an admirable act). How does moral attention enable one to see the world clearly?

Two elements are important to consider in order to understand the role of moral attention. First is Murdoch's the use of metaphors of vision, such as "seeing," to describe moral attention.[87] Following these metaphors many philosophers attribute to Murdoch an ethics of moral perception.[88] A moral agent's perception of moral situations has a significant bearing on her moral life. As Lawrence Blum writes:

> Yet although an agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation, unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberating may be for naught. (Blum 1994, 30)

Perceiving moral situations *as moral situations* requires that one see their particular importance. It is different, in this respect, from perceiving, for instance, a table as a table or an oxidation process as an oxidation process because it is perception of value. Moral attention guides the perception of moral considerations. How attention influences perception is a point I discuss in Section 4. Relatedly, the second important point to consider in seeking to understand the role of moral attention is that one's vision is clear. We might say that it is not obstructed, not diminished, not distorted. Perceiving the world clearly demands that one positions oneself in a certain way. It demands, in Murdoch's terms, that one adopt "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (Murdoch 2002, 34). Moral attention, then, is an attentional

[87] Lawrence Blum (2011) provides an analysis of Murdoch's different metaphors of vision.

[88] There is a rich literature on the topic of moral perception influenced by or discussing Murdoch's ideas. See Blum 1994, Clarke 2011, Laugier 2013, Scott 2013, Cooper 2019, Panizza 2020. Most, if not all, discussions on Murdochian moral perception either analyze this form of perception as a moral activity that is the same as moral attention or as a moral faculty that needs to be supported by moral attention. My concern in this chapter is thus not to discuss moral perception, but moral attention, and to provide analytical tools to better understand the nature of this moral activity.

activity guided, as a form of love, by the idea of the good. We might say that Murdoch's idea of the good is similar to the idea of living well, which I argued in Chapter 3 guides, through the agent's deep ethical concerns, ethical navigation.

Some might find the idea of a form of love guided by the idea of the good too obscure to be in any way illuminating. Yet, Murdoch is describing a common phenomenon. Moral attention, for instance, is a paradigmatic attitude of care. It is an attitude present in the very fabric of ordinary life: caring for one's elderly father, caring for one's child, caring for a friend, caring for a patient in the hospital, caring for one's students, caring for a companion animal—daily care activities that need to be supported by an attentive attitude, "understood as a sensibility to the particularity of a situation. This attention includes a passive element and an active element: it supposes a capacity to let oneself be affected by what is happening and to recognize this affective implication within the relations in which one is embedded" (Garrau 2014, 50, my translation).[89] The Ethics of Care construes ethical questions around the notions of responsibilities, needs, and relationships (Gilligan 1982; Held 2005; Paperman and Laugier 2005; Molinier, Paperman, and Laugier 2009; Garrau 2014). It shapes, as such, ethical inquiry around questions like "What are my responsibilities?," "What does one need?" or "What does this particular relationship need to thrive?" The idea of "Care" is both a normative concept that guides ethical action and a descriptive concept forged through the study of the experience of workers and actors of care. As such, the study of Care is a reflection on how to promote practices that meet responsibilities and maintain relationships and a study of the very life practices in which care is embedded. The study of those daily acts of care is, as Sandra Laugier observes, "the exploration of practices and of the immanence of ordinary life" (Laugier 2008, 89, my translation).[90] The performance of those acts needs to be supplemented with "the capacity to grasp the sense of the action and of the situation, the perception of what is important" (ibid.).[91] This capacity is a form of attention toward others in their particularity and stems from the concern for this particular other and for preserving this relationship (Laugier 2008; see also Tronto 1993; Paperman and Laugier 2005; Nurock 2010; Garrau 2014). Hence, according to the Ethics of Care, moral attention is not an unusual moral phenomenon. It is,

[89] The original reads: « […] l'attention entendue comme sensibilité à la particularité d'une situation. Cette attention inclut un élément passif et un élément actif : elle suppose une capacité à se laisser affecter par ce qui arrive et à reconnaître son implication affective dans les relations où nous sommes inscrits ; […] ». For a comparative study of Murdoch's notion of moral attention with that defended by Care theorists, see Gendron 2016.

[90] The original reads: « […] l'exploration des pratiques et l'immanence de la vie ordinaire. »

[91] The original reads: « […] la capacité à saisir le sens de l'action et de la situation, la perception de ce qui est important. »

moreover, and according to the Weilian, the Murdochian, and the Ethics of Care traditions, one that enables clear moral perception.[92]

Despite these traditions' emphasis on the importance of moral attention, we could still benefit from a better understanding of the nature of this attentive attitude and of the reasons why, in virtue of this nature, it is a counterweight to the ego. A better understanding of both moral phenomena is what I propose to articulate in what remains of this chapter. To do so, I start, in the next section, by arguing that the ego is not an enemy, but a phenomenon that we need to learn to live with. Then, from Sections 4 to 6, I set out to further characterize the nature of moral attention and the way the ego influences the dynamics of our attention.

3. What is the ego? Fat enemy or fertile manure?

Murdoch is pessimistic with regard to the ego. She argues that the ego takes the form of a "fat relentless enemy" (Murdoch 2002, 51). Murdoch takes her pessimism from Freud, who, she writes, presents the human "psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand and control" (Murdoch 2002, 50). Further, pressing her pessimism, she suggests that "goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture" (Murdoch 2002, 51). I agree with Murdoch that a morally significant phenomenon often directs our mind and influences our experience of the world, such that parts of reality are concealed from us. I would like to question, however, her pessimism toward this phenomenon. Can we not, even if only on the basis of our ordinary experiences, also think of a more optimist picture of this phenomenon? Is goodness really so hard to find?

Blind spots cause moral shortcomings. Those are puzzling because most people are not particularly bad. Judge S.'s failures, for instance, are puzzling because she is generally good; her disconcerting shortcomings are the puzzle. Most people are well-intentioned and value things such as care, fairness, friendship, justice, kindness, respect, and so on, as I argued in Chapter 3.[93] However, humans also have to learn to live with the way their mind can lead them

[92] Buddhist psychology and Buddhist ethics also have a rich tradition emphasizing the role and importance of attention in ethical life. A form of attention, in these traditions, also counter-acts a phenomenon named ego, which shares similarities with Murdoch's notion of ego and Simone Weil's notion of personality, in that it is also considered a phenomenon that keeps the subject separated from reality and shut-up within a self-referential narrow perspective. See Analayo 2003; Midal 2006; Manouvrier 2015. I do not discuss this tradition here, first because it would deserve an in depth exploration that I do not have the space to dedicate it within this discussion, second because I think we gain in putting forward Western and contemporary traditions that discuss similar phenomena.

[93] It seems as if daily experiences often confirm this view. Only in the past week, I was struck by two such moments. One was the sudden eagerness of a lady, brushing her teeth next to me in the public bathroom lavabo, wanting to inform me that I was drinking water from the wrong tap. The fact that she could not speak—having

astray.[94] It is misleading, then, to cast the ego as an *enemy*. We might say, to be less dramatic, that the ego is not an enemy, but a phenomenon to be better understood and worked with, perhaps even something like fertile manure, which, while not pleasant to handle, can bear fruit: understanding the ego can allow us to understand ourselves better. To defend this view, I first need to challenge Murdoch's Freudian views of the ego.

I cannot substantially criticize Freud here, but I can consider some criticisms that were made of his account of human nature and human development. Carol Gilligan, in *A Different Voice*, argues that a masculine bias pervades Freud's view of the human ego. His account of human development, that is, which is closely tied to his theory of psychosexual development, is articulated around the experiences of the male child in the process of forming his gender identity (Gilligan 1982).The pessimistic picture of humanity that Murdoch borrows from Freud is at best truncated; it only accounts for part of human experience. Nancy Chodorow argues that at the time of forging their gender roles, female and male children, being still at a young age and generally cared for by mother figures and feminine personalities, undergo very different experiences. On the one hand, boys generally undergo a process of differentiation and separation because male development entails a "more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries" (Chodorow 1978, 150). On the other hand, girls emerge from this period with a basis for empathy built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not (Chodorow 1978, 167). In other words, girls experience a continuity in attachment and relationship, whereas boys experience a form of fracture or discontinuity in their relationships. The former experience favors a conception of life where human relations are central and continuous; the latter favors one in which ties and bonds have to be severed and one has to succeed on one's own. It is no coincidence that one of Murdoch's central examples of what she takes to be rare cases of goodness is that of "inarticulate, unselfish, mothers of large families" (Murdoch 2002, 51–52). These considerations invite us to propose a different picture of ego embedded in an account of human nature as relational, as opposed to detached

her toothbrush in her mouth—made her urgent gestures all the more significant: she just had to tell me that there is better water elsewhere. She just had to make things better for me, a complete stranger. A few days later, I saw a homeless man walking down the street. His face was tense and edgy as he was pulling his numerous plastic bags with an old bicycle. In an instant, however, as a group of his friends called his name across the street, his face lit up. His entire demeanor changed, and he walked up to them with a glorious smile.

[94] Some research on implicit biases (one form the ego could take) suggests conceptualizing implicit biases as "habits of mind" to undo and prevent their pernicious effects (Chapman, Kaatz, and Carnes 2013). This supports part of what I want to argue. Casting the ego as, for instance, some habits of the mind that can have pernicious effects is more helpful, in coming to terms with this phenomenon, than the language of enmity.

and antagonistic, which defuses the demonizing tendencies we might take toward the phenomenon.

We need an undemonized understanding of the ego to better circumvent its related epistemic shortcomings. I propose that we think of ego as a *referencing system* which organizes our different experiences of the world.[95] It forms our sense of self or identity, in relation to which experiences are referenced. These references are often, but not limited to, evaluative references. Judge S., for instance, classifies Rita according to her usual references—her prejudices— as contemptible. This way of judging Rita relies both on Judge S.' evaluative and social references. The interpretation of ego as a referencing system finds support in authors like Albert Low, who attempts to dissipate the negative connotations the idea has acquired:

> I prefer to use the word *personality* rather than the word *ego*, because the latter has acquired a very negative connotation […] The word personality, as it is, is neutral. It refers to the memories, judgments, prejudices, opinions, ideas, thoughts and reactions which all converge towards a center and constitute what we call "self." (Low 2002, 9, my translation)

As in Low's description, we can construe the ego as a perspective one has on the world according to which one's mental life is organized and structured. The ego, as it references, provides a subject with a sense of *self* because it gives coherence to a variety of different experiences that are classified to form a sense of unity.

To better understand the idea of a referencing system, we can turn to research on social cognition where two different ways of referencing are distinguished: the *egocentric* and the *allocentric* perspectives. These perspectives distinguish two standpoints from which one perceives others:

> When we adopt an egocentric stance we understand the other person relative to ourselves, which allows us to locate him in our social world and to interact with him […] An egocentric stance represents the relationship between an individual [be it an object or a person] and the self […] Conversely, taking an allocentric stance means that the existence and/or mental states of others are completely independent from the self. (Frith and de Vignemont 2005, 721–25)

[95] It is possible that Murdoch, in her later writings, agrees with me here. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Chapter 10, "Notes on Will and Duty," she says that our confused and fragmented conscious experience makes of us "distracted creatures, extended, layered, pulled apart," but that we find a sense of unity in "methodical egoism, the barrier which divides the area of our interests and requirements from the rest of the world." Although she says that achieving virtue (becoming good or better) involves the breaking of this barrier, she no longer presents it as a pernicious phenomenon, but as a psychic organizational mechanism. I thank Bridget Clarke for bringing this section to my attention.

Some people have essentially egocentric perspectives. Researchers in social cognition give, as an example, that of a child who becomes upset when his mother must be taken to the hospital because *his* daily plans are undone. As they write: "In naïve egocentrism, the self is the only point of reference" (Frith and de Vignemont 2005, 720). Three things are noteworthy here. First, the differences between the two perspectives are helpful to understand the ego. The description of the egocentric perspective supports the idea that the mind organizes information (like social information) in reference to the self. Second, the allocentric perspective plays a central role in guiding social interactions. Allocentric stance impairments have important, generally negative, implications for social interactions because without this stance we find our understanding of the social world "very impoverished" and "inaccurate" (Frith and de Vignemont 2005, 725–26). We might say, for instance, that the child from the above example's understanding of this social situation is compromised. Third, while the egocentric perspective needs to be balanced by the allocentric one, it nevertheless has a purpose: it allows one to situate oneself with regard to others. We need, in other words, the egocentric perspective because an allocentric perspective alone would give one an abstract understanding of social relations. While experiencing the world with oneself as the ultimate reference point hinders social interactions, the phenomenon whereby we form and maintain a sense of self has a role to play in guiding our interactions with others. Hence, having a sense of self plays a role in guiding moral agency. This is a first way in which the ego's referencing can be fertile. Recall, as I argued in Chapter 2, that moral reasons should be made one's own, as opposed to remaining theoretical reasons, such that they speak to one's agency. We can gain further understanding of this claim with the idea that moral considerations, when properly integrated within one's perspective, precisely cease to be abstract demands and directly speak to one.

We can now come back to the problems that ego nevertheless presents with a more optimistic understanding in hand. A central problem with the ego is that it rapidly *shapes* experience according to usual references (e.g. Judge S. *rapidly* classifies Rita according to her usual references). There is a constant evolution of the ordering process (e.g. Judge S.'s perceptions of Rita's physical appearance are ordered and they further shape her perspective). This is why, as Francisco Varela argues, the self's relation to its environment is a key starting point to understand moral agency. As he writes:

> Ordinary life is necessarily one of *situated* agents, continually coming up with what to do […] This continual redefinition of what to do is not at all like a plan selected from a repertoire of potential alternatives; it is enormously dependent on contingency and improvisation, and is more flexible than any plan can be. A situated cognitive entity

> has—by definition—a perspective. This means that it isn't related to its environment "objectively," independently of the system's location, heading, attitudes, and history. Instead, it relates to it in relation to the perspective established by the constantly emerging properties of the agent itself and in terms of the role such running redefinition plays in the coherence of the entire system. (Varela 1999, 55)

There is a dynamic, we can gather from this quoted passage, between the way one experiences the world, how these experiences are integrated within one's references, *and* the malleability of this referencing process. While the referencing process is malleable, it nevertheless presents a problem for ethical life because it tends to become ossified and closed in on itself. Unless challenged, it thus becomes its own little world—like Gradgrind's system, as noted in Chapter 3. This process pervades moral experience because new experiences are quickly referenced into the closed, ossified perspective. The risk, moreover, is that the agent will not question this perspective and will believe that it tells her the truth about the world (e.g. M would believe that D really is juvenile, Judge S. would believe that indigenous people really are of less worth).

A remedy to the routine blindness sustained by the closed and ossified perspective maintained by the ego is, to put it metaphorically, that of *turning outward*.[96] For instance, M engages in an activity which enables her to come to see things differently—fairly. M thinks "I see D as juvenile. Is that true? I am jealous. Is that warranted?" M turns, so to speak, her mind outward. M counteracts the workings of her prejudices, not only in attending to D, but also to her own mental life in ways which are morally significant. This is the second way in which it can be fertile to better understand the ego. In questioning her perspective, M not only comes to see D with greater clarity, but also gains a clearer view of *her own outlook on life*. M turns outward by attending to D and to her judgments and prejudices, and thereby she also gains a better understanding of herself.

Turning outward shows how M's continued lived experience is bridged with her moral agency. However, turning outward has to be done with one's references as a starting point. This is why, I believe, Murdoch emphasizes the idea that "I can only choose within the world I *see*." She writes, moreover, that "if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over" (Murdoch 2002, 35–36). Murdoch draws a distinction between two attentional activities: attention and moral attention. The first attentional activity is morally neutral, but it builds evaluative structures that can lead us astray. The second attentional activity positively

[96] On this idea, see, for instance, Trungpa 2005, section 3, especially Chapter 14.

guides our moral outlook. The first attentional activity, in other words, is often problematically guided by the ego—as with M and her prejudices. The second attentional activity is that by which one turns outward. It can remedy the blind spots sustained by the ego; it is, as Murdoch argues, "the moral sense of 'see'." Hence, to accept the Murdochian claim that moral attention can remedy problems raised by the ego, we need to distinguish between *attention* and *moral attention*. We need to distinguish between the activity of attention simpliciter and the activity of the moral agent who pays attention. Both are mental activities, but only the second is guided by a moral agent's deep ethical concerns. My goal in Sections 4 to 6 is to develop an account of attention that characterizes it as an activity that structures our mental life to get a clearer picture of the kind of attentional activities Murdoch identifies. With the help of this account, we can explain how the ego influences our attention dynamics and how moral attention counteracts the workings of the ego.

4. Attention: activity organizing the mind

Why are some aspects of reality very salient, whereas others are mere side notes or remain completely ignored? This is another way of formulating one of the questions with which we started this chapter: why do we fail to notice or attend to certain things? Murdoch argues that we have blind spots because of the ego. Can we clarify this claim and how it meshes with the dynamics of attention? Attention is an activity of the mind which organizes mental states into structures of significance, according to Sebastian Watzl's Structuring Mind theory of attention. He provides an account of how attention organizes a subject's mental life. This account explains how attention relates to other mental phenomena like beliefs, emotions, memories, perceptions or thoughts:

> Attention is central to the structure of the mind. [It] is not another element of the mind—like perception, […] emotion, motivation, intentions […] Attentional structure is organizing the mind into parts that are central or prioritized and those that are peripheral. (Watzl 2017, 2)

Attention weaves our different experiences of the world with the other items of our mental life such that some aspects of reality are very salient whereas others are mere side notes or even go unnoticed. To illustrate, Watzl uses the analogy of the layout of a newspaper:

> Think of your current mental life as being like a newspaper. Just as the newspaper contains various stories and reports, your mental life contains various mental states, events, and processes. You see certain things, hear certain things, have certain feelings,

> thoughts and emotions. Attention […] is not another such element in the paper. It concerns the placement of the stories […] front-page article […] fine print […] pushed to the back pages. (Watzl 2017, 70)

These priority structures are structures of "significance" (Watzl 2017, 71) because they sort incoming stimuli into different (types and degrees of) significance. Attention is a distinctive aspect of our mental life that not only differs from other elements of the mind, but organizes them in relation to one another. Like in the newspaper analogy, attention structures mental items according to what is of greater and lesser significance—top priority down to lower or peripheral priorities. There are items which do not make it into the structure. That is, not all psychological items which *could* be in the priority structure make it there. Watzl gives the example of a person intently listening to a jazz trio, who does not hear her friend speaking to her—what the friend says is left out of the structure. There can also be priority structures within and between different mental states and events. For instance, one thought can be prioritized over another or have equal priority to another (e.g. the thought "the sound of this guitar is great" can have equal priority to the elation one feels as one listens to the music). Mental items can also be (de)prioritized with regard to others: Latifa has in mind (it is *in* the priority structure) to ask her friend how her work is going, but she *desires* to stay tuned in to the music; her desire takes priority over other mental elements (remains higher in the structure), such that concern for her friend momentarily remains a distant thought. Hence, the activity of attention deprioritizes some psychological items, such that they become peripheral, and prioritizes others, such that they move to the top of the structure.

Why do priority structures organize themselves the way that they do? Priority structures do not stay fixed; they constantly evolve. What guides this constant flux? Why are the items of the structure *where* they are and why are *these* items there? Watzl discusses two central ways whereby attention is guided in its organizing activities (the regulation of the structures). This explains what elements are present in the structure and why they are where they are (top priority, low priority, etc.). There is what he calls *passive attention guidance* and *active attention guidance*. On the one hand, passive attention guidance guides the ordering of the priority structure independently of the subject's control and is directed by one's experience of the environment. As an example of passive guidance, Watzl gives that of a fire alarm ringing: the perception of the alarm climbs to the top of the priority structure. Sensory perceptions play a central role in passively guiding attention: "it is the way you perceive the environment that

guides the activity [of attention]" (Watzl 2017, 115).[97] Changes can be drastic, as in cases of attention capture, like a fire alarm, or they can be more fluid (e.g. one's gaze moves from one roof top to the other as one stares out of one's hotel room window in Paris). In this case, perception guides the organization of the priority structure because these perceptual states are *psychologically salient*: "Very roughly, the idea is that psychologically salient states are attention guiding because they tell the subject what to prioritize […] Psychological salience consists in having an imperatival content of roughly the form <put *x* on top of a priority structure!>" (Watzl 2017, 126; see also Watzl, 2017, Chapter 6 for his defense of psychological salience). It is, then, within passive attention guidance, the experience of the environment that guides how the structures of salience form and not, for instance, the subject herself who directs her attention.

Active attention guidance, on the other hand, implicates the subject. Active guidance involves, Watzl says, agency of the mind because the shape of the priority structure is governed by the executive control system of the subject in relation to her desires, goals, plans, etc. (e.g. searching for one's keys, devoting one's attention to writing a book, preparing dinner for one's child). One's executive control system guides attention with the motto: "Only prioritize what aligns with the plan!" While the subject can direct attention with her desires, goals, plans, etc. and thus influences how her mental life is structured, it is important to keep in mind that one's attention is often very active without the subject actually attending: "In many situations the subject's attention will thus be engaged and she will have clearly defined (and often rapidly changing) priority structures, and yet she is not attending to anything" (Watzl 2017, 85). There are, then, other sub-forms of attention guidance, which are more intricate in the ways in which the subject's desires, goals, plans, and psychological saliences are interacting. I come back to these sub-forms of guidance in the following section.

The Structuring Mind theory of attention can also account for the interaction of perception and attention. We need a better understanding of this interaction because, as we can recall from Section 3, Murdoch relies on metaphors of vision to render us sensible to the role of moral attention. Two elements are relevant to understand the interplay between attention and perception. First is the relation between attention and perception at the level of *perceptual attention*. Second is the relation between attention and perception at the level of passive guidance. I discuss the first here and the second in the following section, where I explain how

[97] While sensory perception plays a central role in passively guiding attention (seeing, hearing, etc.), perceptual states can also guide intellectual or emotional attention: bring a number of thoughts (e.g. "Am I in danger?" "Is this a test?") or emotions (e.g. fear, anxiety, annoyance brought about by the alarm) to the fore.

the ego influences the ordering of the priority structures. Perceptual attention is a phenomenon whereby one is a *perceiver* of the world. Perception is often considered a passive state, in which the subject merely receives the environment around her (e.g. seeing the waves in the sea, hearing the sound of a seagull). However, there are also common cases of active perception. One is a perceiver of the world, when agency is involved in perceiving such that one somehow molds her experience of the world. This, in turn, influences the beliefs one forms. Feeling, listening, looking are all cases of active perception: instances where the agent is perceptually attending. Importantly, we cannot explain active perception without attention. As such, perception and attention are different in that attention is that which organizes our perceptual experiences and what explains that not all perceiving is passive. Attention explains why one can direct one's experience (e.g. one looks and maintains one's visual perception on waves for some time—the waves are maintained at the top of the structure for some time).

Hence, the Structuring Mind theory of attention explains why we often miss important aspects of a situation. That is because some elements of our mind become peripheral in the priority structure or do not make it into the structure at all. And we understand that attention is responsible for this dynamic because it organizes these structures in relation to the cues of passive or active guidance. However, we do not yet have a story to bridge attention with moral experience and moral agency. Structures form in the way that they do because of how attention is guided. How is attention guidance related to moral agency? To answer this question, I first need to explain how the ego influences the organization of priority structures: how it influences what is salient for the subject.

5. Ego and attention guidance

The ego importantly influences how attention is guided. It modulates how priority structures are organized according to usual references. While some moral considerations are part of our usual references (e.g. a generous person picks up, as part of her usual references, features of the world that call on her generosity), our usual references often create, as Murdoch argues, a falsifying veil. Some priority structures are more open-ended, however, and allow for our moral experience to be less constrained. It is thanks to *open-endedness* that moral considerations can enter a subject's priority structures, come to have significance in them and not remain blind spots. We thus need to counteract the effects of falsification, by keeping structures more open-ended. Why do some structures remain close-ended and some become open-ended? To answer this question, we need to better understand how the ego drives attention.

To see how the ego influences the way attention organizes our mental life, let me consider how the mental lives of the subjects in my three main examples (see Section 1.1) are structured at time *t*. To make the illustrations manageable, I simplify the content of their priority structures to four or five items including emotions, memories, perceptions, and thoughts. Although one's mental life is certainly more complex than these descriptions, this provides a snapshot of the organization of one's mind at *t*. From the top of the structure (highest salience) to the periphery (lowest salience), here is how their minds are organized at *t*:

> **Judge S.**: the perception of Rita's teeth and hair; disgust; the perception of Rita's voice; contempt; annoyance at the way Rita tells her story; the thought "What could one expect from *these* people?"; distant thoughts about the case;
>
> **Merrick**: a perception of the religious statue; curiosity; the thought that he has never seen something like it; the thought that he appreciates meeting Raphael; feeling moved; the distant thought that he needs to make progress with regard to their mission;
>
> **Clements**: a perception of the religious statue; vivid curiosity; the thought that he needs to find out how it *really* works; a memory of what he has read about such statues; annoyance at the fact that Raphael will not explain the functioning of the statue; a form of conceited amusement at the idea that villagers think these statues are real;
>
> **M** (not when she meets D, but once she questions herself): a memory of D; the thought that she is unpolished and juvenile; doubt; the thought that she, M, is old-fashioned and conservative; a feeling of jealousy; thoughts about her being jealous; the thought that she might have misjudged D; general memories about D.

To analyze these examples, we need to keep in mind that attention is the activity of regulating the structures and that the way structures are shaped at *t* indicates what occupies one's attention at *t*. I want to emphasize the difference between the priority structures of Merrick and M and those of Clements and Judge S. The structures of the former are more open-ended, whereas the structures of the latter are regulated according to their usual references. Clements is looking like "a St Bernard dead set on winning a swimming medal." His attention is driven by his scientific goals and constrained by his prejudices. This happens to the detriment of his relations with the people of the community who feel disrespected. In contrast, M's priority structure is also at first influenced by her prejudices, which then evolve through her self-questioning, and this, in turn, allows her to attend to new aspects of the situation and for a novel priority structure to form. Thanks to this novel prioritizing, M forms true beliefs about D. How are Clements and M's attentional activities guided and where does the ego play a role?

There are active and passive modes of attention guidance, as we saw in the previous section. The subject mostly influences attention at the active level. In cases of passive attention guidance, perceptual experiences guide the organization of the structure—aspects of the world around one take priority over other mental items and this regardless of the subject's desires, goals, and plans. As such, we might suppose that the ego influences attention within active guidance and *only* within active guidance—it is, after all, a referencing system relative to the subject, so we should expect that it guides attention according to the subject's desires, goals, and plans. But that is not quite right. Indeed, Watzl also identifies two variations of passive guidance where the executive control system somehow indirectly influences attention. This is important because if the ego impinges on passive guidance, then this explains why it interferes with one's experience and constrains it, despite one having other aims at the active level (e.g. it can explain why, despite her goal to be fair, Judge S. only notices irrelevant features of Rita, whom she quickly and unfairly judges).

Let us first consider cases of *mind wandering.* Mind wandering is an example of passive guidance where the executive system has indirect influence: "intellectual attention drifts to thoughts that are unrelated to your current tasks, or your current environment" (Watzl 2017, 133). Mind wandering is not guided by psychological saliences alone because it requires some control from the executive system which buffers the imperatives of psychological saliences such that they are deprioritized (e.g. sitting by the sea, one sees the movement of the waves, but one's mind wanders to questions about dinner). Importantly, in these cases the executive system is not fully involved. Mind wandering, that is, "does not engage the subject's full goal hierarchy" (Watzl 2017, 134). It is nevertheless guided by some of the subject's concerns (e.g. what to eat for dinner) *and* dissociates the subject from her current experience (e.g. although one sees the waves, this perception becomes deprioritized as soon as one thinks about dinner). Yet, while these concerns belong to the subject, they are not the deepest ones; they might not even be concerns the subject identifies with, like one's prejudices. This is why, in the case of mind wandering, thoughts do not actively come to the top of the priority structure, but drift in and out of there (e.g. as one is focused on writing an article, one finds oneself thinking about household chores). Mind wandering is interesting for the present question because it accounts for how a subject's experience can be short-circuited. This is a first way through which we can miss important aspects of a situation. Although it seems plausible that the ego modulates the subject's experience in the form of mind wandering, it is still not its most worrisome influence.

Let us remind ourselves of how the ego drives the experience of the subject. According to Murdoch, one *could* see the world as it really is (e.g. Judge. S could see Rita as her equal

and have compassion for her predicament). There are moments when our experience is not constrained by our usual references or, arguably, when our usual references are in line with reality. However, our experience is often constrained. The ego constrains experience of the subject by affecting the salience of psychological items. It is, in this respect, I would argue, a form of what Watzl calls *motivational penetration.* Motivational penetration indirectly influences how psychological saliences passively guide attention (e.g. "For a fluent reader of the Cyrillic alphabet, a certain letter pops out and catches her attention while seeing the same sign has no psychological salience for someone unfamiliar with that alphabet") (Watzl 2017, 136). Many factors influence motivational penetration, including: currently activated goals or current activity of the subject; expected rewards; addictions; a subject's emotional responses and moods (see Watzl 2017, Chapter 6). I call these factors *motivational reference points.* What is psychologically salient to a subject, and to what degree, depends crucially on these motivational reference points—although these are often not aligned with the subject's higher desires, goals, and plans, like her deep ethical concerns.

The ego, as a form of motivational penetration, brings coherence to the subject's experience in line with her usual references, even if the latter are not desired by the subject (e.g. addiction, an undesired emotion, etc.). As in the Cyrillic alphabet example, if one does not know this alphabet, then one experiences a stop sign in Moscow "*CTOIT*" differently (with less salience) than one who is proficient in this alphabet. The ego manages the motivational reference points and maintains an indirect conversation with psychological saliences to direct what is salient to the subject, thus importantly influencing and constraining how a subject experiences the world. Again, similar to mind wandering, the prioritization is often not aligned with the higher goals or needs of the subject or with what she has reason to do (e.g. if one is driving in Moscow, although not fluent in Cyrillic, one nevertheless has to stop. Similarly, Judge S.'s prejudices interfere with her desire to be fair and with the reasons she has to treat Rita with respect). For priority structures to align with a subject's higher goals, needs or what she has reason to do, what is salient needs to change.

The problem is that given the ego, what *is* prioritized and what *should* be prioritized come apart. Watzl writes that "in order to change what is salient to her a subject must, literally, change the way she sees the world" (Watzl 2017, 137). To change the way she sees the world, Murdoch argues, the moral agent should attend. How does this attending differ from the activity of attention we have discussed in this section and the previous one? In the next section, taking stock of Waltz's account, I argue that attending is a form of attention actively guided with low control. It is an attentional activity which keeps the regulation of priority structures open-ended.

6. Attending: activity of the moral agent

Moral agents should rely on moral attention to guide their moral experience. That is, they should attend in a way that guides what is (de)prioritized, to counterwact the influence of the ego. As Murdoch writes: "I have used the word 'attention' […] to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (Murdoch 2002, 33). The process of prioritization is constantly active. However, it is possible for moral agents to actively notice how their prioritizing operates (e.g. "M thinks: I judge her too harshly, let me look again") and to orient attentional activities in one direction rather than another. How can a moral agent's experience of the world be organized such that she recognizes what is ethically important (e.g. how can Judge S. recognize Rita's marginalization and despair such that they inform her judgment about the case)? How can one influence the dynamics between what usually remains covered (deprioritized or not even in the priority structure) and what is revealed as a priority?

Moral attention is an attentional activity, paramount to competent moral agency, whereby one takes an open-minded attitude toward the world to successfully see, and thereby be in a position to appreciate, what a moral situation asks of one. One has moral understanding, as we can recall from Chapter 3, when one is able to successfully navigate ethical life. To navigate ethical life, one needs to be epistemically engaged with humility and to appreciate moral reasons. Moral attention, although it is does not exhaust epistemic engagement, guides other epistemic abilities (e.g. doubting, exploring, questioning), such that one is in a position to appreciate moral situations for what they are. Moral attention, as we can recall from Section 2, is a form of active receptivity that is open to novelty, humble, and relates one to a particular reality. Moral attention thus comes prior to appreciation within the navigation. Moral attention is the activity of *attending*. For the remainder of the text, I will use "attending" and "moral attention" interchangeably, and use "attention" to refer to attention simpliciter.

Watzl's characterization of attention guidance does not capture the guidance specific to attending. His framework nevertheless provides the right tools to account for this kind of active receptivity. The Structuring Mind theory of attention can account for active receptivity, I argue, if we include, within the categories of attention guidance, that of *active guidance with low control*. Active guidance with low control is a hybrid between passive and active guidance, which, unlike mind wandering or motivational penetration, is guided by the subject's deep ethical concerns. It is not passive guidance alone, because the agent deliberately attends (e.g. it is not merely like the perception of a fire alarm coming to the top of the priority structure).

It is not simple active guidance either, since it is not guided by the agent's executive control system. Although the agent decides to attend, it involves a process similar to passive guidance because what she attends to is not guided by a defined personal goal.

The subject *willingly* experiences the world without a definite plan. This means that she does not control for whether the world aligns with a plan, but only disposes herself toward the world. The experience, we could say, is open. But it is guided, because one keeps it open; one does not just leave it up to psychological saliences or motivational penetrations to direct the organization process of the priority structure. As such, experience of the external world guides the structures in as much as the subject turns outward and is open to novel experiences (e.g. new physical perceptions, new encounters, allowing oneself to see a situation differently, taking into consideration other people's experiences, etc.). Moreover, because there is no goal or plan, one does not just disengage attention once the goal or plan is achieved. One maintains attention, although there is, so to speak, nothing to be gained in doing so.

In attending, a moral agent is active in promoting an attitude which is itself passive. This attitude promotes a form of openness to the world such that ethically relevant items can enter one's priority structures. To fully understand the scope of attending, it is helpful to recall Murdoch's idea that living ethically involves investigating what is unknown—our own mental references, other people's experiences, novel perspectives, etc. (Hepburn and Murdoch 1956, 48). There is no definite plan because one who attends, as it were, sets out to explore a situation. For instance, as M attends, she bypasses her usual references because she willingly questions her perspective. Doing so involves not knowing in advance what she is going to discover. This means that a moral agent who attends, as Martha Nussbaum suggests, is willingly exposing herself to surprises.[98] Surprises can shake one out of one's usual references. For instance, the difference between Merrick and Clements is that Merrick is completely bewildered by the uncommon and unsettling elements of the village: the way it is built, the people who live there, their practices. He is surprised, but he does not judge: he attends to what he does not know and does not assume a kind of superiority. He is actively remaining open to this novelty. Whereas Clements's attention is driven by his scientific goals: it is active guidance with a definite plan. When one has a definite plan, the executive control system strives to ensure that the plan is

[98] I take the idea of accepting the virtue of surprises in one's ethical life from Martha Nussbaum (1990). Nussbaum skillfully invites surprises into moral life as an antidote to a form of ankylosed moralism. Allowing surprises back into his moral life is what allows the character she describes in her text—Strether—to experience a moral movement, we might even say to gain back something approaching what we could call agency.

fulfilled, at the cost of disregarding aspects of reality that do not align with the plan. Attending, like in Merrick's case, opens experience and this enables new priority structures to emerge.

Opening experience is not the only way to create new priority structures. A rapid change in one's environment, for instance, can also do this (e.g. D suddenly makes an uncharacteristic comment that raises doubt in M and makes her question her first impressions). However, attending is necessary and sufficient to open experience. It is not, however, always sufficient to create new priority structures because other mental states like emotions, imagination, and reflection can and will often also contribute (I will discuss the contribution of emotions in changing priority structures in the next chapter). Attending acts as a counterweight to the ego because it provides a path back to experience before it is referenced. It *disengages*, that is, the referencing work of the ego by promoting a direct relation between the subject and her experience. Both Judge S. and M have judgments fed by prejudices, but the important moral difference between them is that the latter is in contact with her prejudices and questions her perspective. Were Judge S. to attend to the situation, she might have first noticed how agitated Rita was, that she was scared, and that this is why she spoke so chaotically. She might have asked "Who is this person?," "What is her story?," "What is she trying to tell me?" This way of remaining open toward the situation would have importantly disengaged Judge S.'s prejudices and prevented her from quickly referencing Rita, from feeling contempt for her, etc.

One might question whether there really is no definite goal or plan within the attentional activity I am describing here. Is the realization of deep ethical concerns an objective? Some clarity on this point will be helpful. When one walks along a dark forest path at night, for instance, and is careful not to trip, one seeks to preserve one's safety. One has the definite objective of protecting oneself, but no clear idea about what this will entail. It is, one could say, a definite objective, which is multiply realizable.[99] However, these moments when one pays attention to favor one's safety (or to control for danger) are different from the ones I am describing here in that there is *a* value to be promoted. We do not know what will promote it. In this case, there is a definite goal: entering the dark forest, the agent forms the belief "I should be careful." Similarly, recall from Chapter 2 that once one appreciates moral reasons, one forms a self-engaging moral belief of the form "I should Φ" (e.g. I should help this person). Once this practical belief is formed, the moral agent is in the same situation as the person trying to be careful in the forest; she will then actively guide attention toward, for instance, helping someone: a definite goal which is multiply realizable. However, the role of attending comes

[99] I thank Julien Deonna for raising this counterpoint.

prior to the formation of this kind of practical belief. While the attentive moral agent has deep ethical concerns (like someone who also has deep prudential concerns), it remains open as to what exactly is to be favored in a given situation. Attending is rather like aimlessly walking into the woods: one does not know where one is going, but one is open to encounter the woods in all its value. One is open, for instance, to experience the delicate beauty of intensified greenness of moss and evergreen trees after heavy rain and the way it starkly contrasts with the rusty red color of fall leaves. Or one is aimlessly strolling through a used bookshop, curious, open to find books, but not looking for any book in particular. In both cases, one's attention is actively guided with low control because one is attentive to one's environment but does not control for the success of any goal or plan, not even that of finding beauty or finding a good book. However, one will, because of one's openness, appreciate beauty or a good book, if one encounters it.

The analysis of ego and moral attention with the Structuring Mind theory of attention I conducted from Sections 4 to 6 should provide us with a better understanding of the way our mental life is regimented through attention and the place and role of these moral phenomena within the economy of our mental and moral life. In this section, I argued that attending—a necessary tenet of competent moral agency—is a form of attention which is actively guided with low control. In the next section, I further motivate the claim that attending is an activity that is not directed toward a definite goal or plan. Then, in Section 6.2, I stress the ordinary character of this attentional activity through the description of two life practices that are supported by it. The first is a kind of contemplative practice which some have named *praying*; the second is a certain way of *reading*. They are examples of common practices in which attending is exercised.

6.1 Praxis vs techne: why is attending an activity?

Attending is an activity necessary for competent moral agency—an activity whereby one takes the time to question one's perspective, to experience moments of openness, to be surprised, challenged, and so forth. I press that attending is an activity because it is a movement that involves the making and remaking of ethically relevant priority structures. It is similar in this way to the activity of attention, which is an ongoing process of an awakened life constantly structuring our mental life. Activity *(praxis)*, according to Aristotle, is paradigmatic of moral

agency. The object of this activity is acting well (*eupraxia*) for its own sake.[100] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts this activity with *production*.[101] He draws this distinction to characterize two intellectual faculties that engage one in deliberation. One discipline concerns production *(techne)* which aims at a *qualified* goal: the goal lies outside the process of production itself and is *definite*—building a house and making shoes are examples. The second discipline is guided by an *unqualified* goal: "[An unqualified goal is] what we achieve in *action*, since acting well is the goal […]" (*NE* 1139b4). This distinction is useful to further distinguish between active guidance driven by the executive control system and active guidance with low control. In the former, the subject attends to this or that object or situation in relation to a definite goal (e.g. searching for one's keys, writing a book, organizing one's finances, building a house, making shoes). The subject's plans have causal and counterfactual control over her priority structures (i.e. only prioritize what aligns with the plans). This way of guiding attention is production-oriented—it channels one's experiences and thoughts toward what favors the achievement of the goal. Importantly, once the goal is reached, attention is no longer maintained on the object or situation. By contrast, a *praxis* is an activity which is its own goal and does not aim at a qualified goal outside itself.

In the spirit of Aristotle's ethics, we can say, moreover, that a virtuous agent attends well. A virtuous agent has prudence (*phronesis*). Prudence is the intellectual virtue attached to the realm of living well in general. This virtue needs a number of intellectual faculties and states in order to function: good deliberation, comprehension, cleverness, perception (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI). These intellectual faculties and states, when joined together excellently, enable one to know what are good or bad actions for a human being. I think of attending as one of these intellectual faculties. When done excellently, it is part of being virtuous. One cannot be virtuous without attending, but one can attend without being virtuous—one can attend less than excellently. Hence, the difference between a virtuous and an ordinary moral agent is that the former attends excellently to moral situations while the latter sometimes attends excellently and other times does not.

[100] This is one of the meanings with which Aristotle uses *praxis*. He also uses *praxis* and *prattein* to talk about intentional actions in general. He also uses it in a narrower sense for rational action done out of decision (which, for him, excludes animals). I am interested here in the third sense, where he uses *praxis* for rational action which is its own end—it is complete activity (see Aristotle 1999, Glossary, action/*praxis*). I am especially interested in how it contrasts with production in how it situates the agent with regard to the goal involved. A praxis has no goal beyond itself.

[101] See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

I emphasize that attending is an activity to also answer the worry that attending is too demanding for moral agents because it seems like the task of counteracting the ego will never be achieved. Why, one might ask, give moral agents a task that they cannot accomplish? This worry can arise depending on how one interprets some of Murdoch's ideas. She writes that "The good and just life is thus a process of clarification, a movement towards selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of love" (Murdoch 1993, 14). If we can follow her on the idea that moral agents are engaged in an activity of clarification throughout their "good and just life" to see the world outside their usual references, as I do, some might be uneasy with the idea that this activity needs to be guided by ideas of perfection. However, I do not believe her account is bound to endorse ideals of perfection in a way that would feel oppressive for the subject. One learns to live ethically throughout one's life and one guides this life with a humble epistemic engagement. Perfection can be seen as antagonistic to the process of learning which implies mistakes and failure—one learns through mistakes. This is a point Murdoch herself recognizes, I believe, when she notes that "M could be helped [as she attends] by someone who both knew D and whose conceptual scheme M could understand […]" (Murdoch 2002, 31). The idea of perfection, rather than inspiring a sense of heaviness, is supposed to be uplifting because it "inspires love in the part of us that is most worthy" (Murdoch 2002, 60). Hence, attending is not too demanding because it is an activity inspired by love, for which one can rely on support. It is an activity that suggests that we have the humility (a point discussed in Chapter 1) to ask for help, and not hold ourselves to impracticable standards.

6.2 Attending in ordinary life: "sitting with" the problem, praying, and reading

Attending is not uncommon and can be found in daily life, as I said in Section 3. Recognizing attending within our ordinary practices is important to defend the plausibility of its role. If the ego is to be remedied by an active reception of the particular details of other realities, then it cannot—indeed, must not—be such a deep flaw such that other particular realities are inaccessible. If attending can broaden our horizons, that is, through the formation of new priority structures it must not be unfamiliar or beyond reach. Can we find moments of attending in our ordinary lives?

Philosophers who have pressed the importance of moral attention have emphasized two life practices in which attending is exercised. The first is a contemplative activity which some have named *praying*. The second is a certain way of *reading*. Importantly, these two activities

(can) easily find their way into our ordinary lives. They are activities most people can experience and engage in. That is not to say that we should consider these activities as distinct from our ethical lives, as if they were training exercises one performs to train one's moral agency, sheltered from the real demands of ethical life. Rather, I believe that those who emphasize the importance of these practices see them as being an integral part of living ethically because of the kind of relation to others and to the world that these practices imply and nurture. Moreover, both activities depend on attentional and *emotional* qualities. This is relevant because, as I will argue in the next chapter, it is through emotional experiences that we can appreciate the importance of moral considerations. In light of the role attending plays in revealing moral considerations, it is telling of the nature of moral experience that attending also gives rise to emotional experiences that are key to one's moral understanding.

Attending is similar to praying, according to Simone Weil: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer" (Weil 1986, 212). Naming this activity "praying" should not make it something foreign to us, for Weil speaks of a common experience:

> Prayer being only attention in its pure form and studies being a form of gymnastics of attention, each school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life. There must be a method in it. *A certain way of doing* a Latin prose, *a certain way of* tackling a problem of geometry (*and not just any way*) make up a system of gymnastics of attention […]. (Weil 1986, 214–15, my emphasis)

Praying is an instantiation of what Weil presses as "a certain way of doing," by which of course she means *a certain way of paying attention*. Christopher Mole suggests the following excerpt from Kathleen Jamie as an example of Weil's *a certain way of doing,* as a way of secularizing the notion of prayer:

> Could I explain to Phil that—though there was a time, maybe 24 hours, when I genuinely believed his life to be in danger—I had not prayed? But I had noticed, more than noticed, the cobwebs, and the shoaling light, and the way the doctor listened, and flecked tweed of her skirt, and the speckled bird and the sickle-cell man's feet. Isn't that a kind of prayer? The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed?[102]

Through this certain way of doing, as in this excerpt, one notices infinitely better the details of one's reality. This open attitude can be cultivated, according to Weil, in activities as mundane as doing a Latin prose or working on a problem of geometry. It is not that one writes a Latin

[102] This excerpt is from Jamie 2005, 109. Christopher Mole (2022) relies on the excerpt as an illustration of the way secular forms of prayer find their ways in our lives.

prose or works on a problem of geometry—both could be done negligently or in a haste—but that one takes the time to sit with the "problem." Why does Weil liken this to praying?

Weil likens her *a certain way of doing* to prayer because as an experience it is phenomenologically similar to that of praying. What is a prayer? Natalie Depraz describes praying as a naked experience, part of daily life and one which requires constant learning: "la prière est tout à la fois une expérience nue, quotidienne, et qui requiert un apprentissage permanent" (Depraz 2004, 503). By which she means that it is a practice, done over and over again, generally on a daily basis. It is a naked experience—it is an experience that is very little tempered by the subject's control; it is as open to the world around one as possible (i.e. active guidance with low control). In this respect, we find the same characteristics as Jamie's description; it involves deliberately opening one's attention to the world and maintaining it as such. Jamie, like one who prays, sits in silence and notices the simple details of her environment. And praying, as Depraz says, needs to be learned constantly. This is a way of saying, I believe, that one is never done turning outward—it is a practice (see Section 6.1).

Praying is a simple practice, but it is regimented with very specific forms: one sits in a stable position, generally in silence (often alone), while also paying attention to one's breath. Sometimes one then repeats a short sentence over and over.[103] Maintaining one's attention deliberately on something so banal and repetitive as one's breath or the same words guides the experiential flow. That is, one has thoughts, impressions, memories, emotions, but they do not stay high in the priority structure because one also maintains one's attention on the same simple object. Maintaining one's attention deliberately on something uninteresting structures one's immediate experience by *disengaging* the usual references: the executive control system and the motivational penetrations. This opens up one's experience: it reduces its constriction by the usual references, thus allowing new priority structures to form.

Moments of attending give rise to a phenomenologically salient experience: feeling one's heart open. That is, to put it in a less atomistic tone, it is an experience of love. This aspect is common to the accounts of Depraz, Murdoch, and Weil. The constant, disciplined repetition of attending to a very simple object—be it one's breath, cobwebs, a Latin prose—promotes an experience of love. This matches reports, Depraz writes, of those who pray

[103] Depraz discusses, in particular, the *Prayer of the Heart* or *Jesus Prayer* which is a formulaic prayer. Those who pray repeat over and over a formula of the form "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy." However, her description of the experience of praying is similar to that discussed by Weil and Mole and supports their suggestion that the experience of praying can be laicized. The repetition of this particular formula or any formula is not a necessary part of the experience they are looking to describe.

regularly: “Il s’agit par conséquent d’observer patiemment le mouvement continue du flux mental depuis un espace élargi, celui du Coeur” (Depraz 2004, 507).

The human practices which Weil and Depraz describe, and which Jamie finds herself doing, could be characterized thus:

1) they are not directed at decision-making;
2) they are somewhat solitary;
3) they are slow and directed at simple, ordinary objects—which are not particularly exciting or interesting;
4) they reveal details that would otherwise go unnoticed;
5) they provide a certain kind of insight;
6) they are phenomenologically salient—inspiring love and opening the heart.

These practices, whether “praying” or “sitting with,” denote moments of ordinary life when we find ourselves present to the world such as to receive it in its most infinite ordinary details—“the cobwebs, and the shoaling light”—the ways in which a stranger stands, smiles, holds her hand, gazes into the distance, suffers, sits uneasily, seeks approval, and so on. Or again, the way in which our presence poisons the air, makes others uncomfortable, our simple motions or words hurtful in their indelicacy. Or again, the ways in which another person presents herself to you, although she is part of your everyday life, in a novel light—not as subordinate, but as equal, not as an object, but as a subject, not as foreign, but as very much the same in her joys and sorrows. Attending enables an ordinary, albeit precious, experience—the experience of having gotten out of one’s own way—outside of the constraints of one’s usual references, such that one lovingly sees the world in its important, subtle, and infinite detail. Such *moments of being* precisely instantiate the kind of attentive activity I characterize as attending.

If praying and other contemplative practices can be part of one’s daily life, many might find more intuitive the idea that attending is practiced through reading. Sandra Laugier argues that some ways of reading literature take the form of a moral exploration (an adventure of imagination, as she puts it) guided by a form of open attention. Reading promotes the movement of turning outward as long as we consent to attend to the unknown lives and narratives presented to us. Reading literature is an opportunity to immerse ourselves in new perspectives, offering fertile ground to consider new ethical possibilities. From the start of a novel, readers can become immersed in the characters’ circumstances and can follow them as they evolve through different circumstances. A story can provide deep moral insight, not because its content is explicitly moral, but because, as Cora Diamond suggests, of “what it

achieves through the telling of the narrator's experiences, and through the extraordinary ability to bring experiences, events, and moral ideas into connection with each other" (Diamond 1996, 95). In that respect, the kind of moral exploration made possible by reading literature takes the form of an adventure, where one engages with novel things, even if this can be demanding, uneasy, or outright scary. It is an adventure because one takes a risk within the exploration of novel perspectives. The risk of discovering, perhaps painfully, that one is wrong, that one does not understand another, that one is at a loss, that one is shaken by the discovery of something new and unexpected. For instance, one can discover what it can be like to be a married woman in 1920, to be a factory worker, to be marginalized, to be raised without love. One can, of course, also often make lighter, uplifting discoveries. Adventuring in these narratives can provide one with the unique opportunity to become oneself the hero of another life; to experience the realities of other lives in their unique intricacies. Taking part in this adventure is active receptivity; it is attending.

7. What if attending is ineffective?

One might worry that attending will be for naught if the agent attends within a social context itself plagued with biases, prejudices or propaganda. For instance, let us say that Judge S.'s racist prejudices extend to all people of color. Let us then situate Judge S. in rural Arkansas in 1857. Surely, the Southern antebellum society, with its entrenched racism, would have prevented her from coming anywhere close to undoing her existing worldview? This is a serious worry.[104] Attending enables a moral agent to see the world clearly, thus improving her moral epistemic wherewithal. How can one see the world clearly, if all her social surroundings unite to confirm her prejudices? In this case, one might rightly worry that attending is insufficient. This worry also speaks to the concern that it is especially difficult for humans to disengage from common references (such as biases and prejudices).[105] This latter aspect is supported by studies on attention in cognitive psychology, that show that regularities often impose structures of salience on a given situation, thus modulating the patterns of an agent's

[104] Bridget Clarke (2011) raises a similar worry which suggests that this kind of uncritical conservatism is still present today and that Judge S. does not need to be situated in past societies to support the worry that attending can be misguided. Nevertheless, we might say that there are more resources to question one's entrenched prejudices in today's United States than there were in the reality of 1857 Arkansas. This example is thus meant to give a starker illustration of the problem.

[105] I thank Christopher Mole for pointing out this further aspect.

attention.[106] Crucially, it seems that the subject is completely unaware of such regularities. These imposed structures of salience are difficult to disengage from because they operate at the sub-agential level—thus intervening outside the scope of what the agent can control. It is, in other words, easy to impose salience structures, but hard to change that structure, once it is imposed.[107] While these results are extrapolated from controlled laboratory experiments, we can nevertheless take from them—to put it in Watzl's terms—that the passive guidance of attention is sensitive to factors which often have nothing to do with what is relevant for one's deeper concerns (e.g. for one's deep ethical concerns). The mere fact that something presents itself as a regularity gives no reason to accept it as revealing something important; it becomes salient merely because of its regularity. What determines saliency can often be misleading.

With this in mind, we might think that, for instance, for Clements to realize that he is being disrespectful to the villagers or simply for him to recognize the intrinsic worth of the villagers, it will take the presence of "unregular patterns." For instance, Merrick challenging him or not obtaining what he wants from the villagers because they are angry at him; something in his environment should confront him and elicit the desired questioning. Similarly, we might be rightly worried that Judge S. cannot find useful irregularities in her Southern environment and that precisely her current priority structures will be constantly confirmed by her social surroundings—her belief that people of color are below her, her belief that slave ownership is natural and normal, the contemptible nature of people of color—will remain at the top of her priority structure. Rather than being questioned, they will be confirmed by her social environment. And this will be so, we might think, even if Judge S. is making ethical efforts of attention, she will never come around to undo her racist outlook. We might name this worry, like Clarke, "the charge of uncritical conservatism," as she writes:

> The question of how one knows when one's perceptions of others are sound takes on special urgency when one considers that the sort of misperceptions of African-Americans at issue, like a number of other misperceptions, finds support in American society. The series of prison-workers who dealt with Kerry Sanders[108] were backed by deeply entrenched preconceptions about homeless people and black men when they didn't bother to "look again." These preconceptions can tacitly shape one's perceptions, whatever one's avowed principles. We can take Herman's point to be that where such

[106] Ru Qi Yu and Jiaying Zhao (2015) conducted a series of experiments where the subjects' visual attention was consistently biased toward regularities. Here regularities are those of one's direct perceptual environment, most of which remain stable over space and time.
[107] See Yu & Zhao 2015 and Mole 2022.
[108] This describes the story of Kerry Sanders who was mistakenly imprisoned for the crimes of Robert Sanders, despite having a completely different life history and showing a distinct physical appearance. The two men had in common that they were African-Americans (Weiser 2000). "My Name is not Robert," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (August 6, 2000): 30–63.

> preconceptions abound, one may need more than a capacity to face unpleasant truths about oneself and to see the best in others in order to see clearly.
>
> More specifically, the suggestion might be that some misperceptions have roots in deeply entrenched prejudices which are part of the *social* fabric, not just the fabric of the soul, so to speak. (Clarke 2011, 235)

We seem, then, to have a serious problem in hand and one which is insidious in nature. There are patterns that not only come from our own fabric—our own referencing system—but that are built into the *social fabric*, which influence our views, perceptions, judgments, actions. And we can rightly suppose, following data from cognitive psychology, that the patterns of the social fabric are regularities which inevitably create structures of salience to which we are susceptible. We also learn from these experiments and from common observations—as Clarke suggests—that it is difficult for us to *disengage* from these common structures of salience. As such, we might think that what we need, to put it simply, is something which can *shake us out* of such common worldviews tied to the social environment.

Can we be shaken out of such worldviews? And if we can, does attending present a possible path for doing so? One of Mark Twain's famous characters provides us with an example that we *can* be shaken out of entrenched prejudices maintained by our social environment. This being shaken out has to do with unmitigated "direct" experiences—the kind of experiences that attending favors. This famous example, moreover, conveniently takes place in the Southern society where we have placed Judge S. I have in mind, of course, the story of Huckleberry Finn. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain presents us with a boy who runs away from his abusive father and embarks on an adventure down the Mississippi River with, as his faithful sidekick, Jim, a runaway slave. We know that Huck was raised with the beliefs of his society—he believes that slavery is normal, natural, necessary. However, within the duration of their voyage, he rapidly becomes friends with Jim. They spend their days together, rely on each other, develop trust. At some point in their journey, Huck encounters a moment which shakes him out of his worldview. It is also a moment in the story where Huck is brought back to regularities. There comes a point along the river where people are looking to capture runaway slaves. Huck is struck at first because he thinks that he *ought* to turn Jim in—Jim is, after all, Miss Watson's property—Huck ought not to steal Jim from her. Huck's conscience tells him: "What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?" (Twain 2016, 93). However, Huck is also struck by the realization that he does not want to—*cannot*—turn him in. When

prompted to turn Jim in, Huck "just felt sick," and when asked about Jim, he says: "I didn't answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn't come" (Twain 2016, 95). The young Huck is at a loss to explain his reluctance to himself, and he believes he has done wrong, but he clearly cannot return Jim—his friend, his equal!?—to slavery.

This example is interesting, not because Huck is attending to the situation, but because he undergoes a similar experience as that which attending promotes. He experiences moral considerations to which he is usually blind—like most in his society. This experience takes place in an irregular setting—Huck and Jim are running away on a raft together; they do not meet on the street in town. This is significant, because, as Nomy Arpaly writes, "during the time he spends with Jim, Huckleberry undergoes a perceptual shift" (Arpaly 2002, 77).[109] What is important here is not just that he undergoes such a shift, but what enabled such a shift: had he met Jim down the street in town, Huck would never have recognized that Jim is a person just like him. So, the novel circumstances create an opportunity for some perceptions and emotions to take a novel position in Huck's priority structures. The fact that Jim is a person did not find its place within Huck's priority structure at first—not even within the items of the structure. Through the course of their many days together on the river, new details become available to Huck (they make it into the priority structure). Huck does not explicitly notice this—he could not, for instance, verbalize it. Huck experiences novel aspects of reality, in other words, because their raft adventure takes him out of the regularities and allows for the creation of new priority structures. Moreover, the work which has been going on in his experiencing starkly come to light once he is confronted with common patterns—when having to turn Jim in, he finds himself unable to do so; it is confusing to him that he feels sick. This last step works to make his perspective shift for good because he battles with his common beliefs and eventually disregards them. Can attending promote a similar shift?

Attending can promote a shift of perspective because it directs the subject's experience toward novelty and openness. Is this not what we need to counter misleading patterns of regularity? Huck undergoes a significant change of perspective, not because he carefully thought about the matter or was given novel arguments, but because space was made for novel priority structures to arise. These new structures made new perceptions salient. Interestingly,

[109] Nomy Arpaly (2002) relies on the Huck example to illustrate that, although one can fail to be responsive to the right reasons through deliberation, one can be responsive to them viscerally. Arpaly uses this example to discuss the case of *inverse akrasia*: doing the right thing, against one's best judgment. I too think this story has to do with reasons recognition, but rather than emphasizing, like Arpaly, the conflict within the agent and his worth thereof—Arpaly argues that there is moral worth in cases of inverted akrasia, unlike usual cases of akrasia—I am interested in the process through which Huck comes to recognize those reasons.

Huck did not explicitly form new beliefs about Jim—this we find out because of his puzzlement at not being able to explain to himself why he cannot turn him in; he does not even think to himself "Jim is my friend." The shift is done through the new perceptions of Jim's characteristics and, we might add, some novel emotions Huck experiences such as affection, trust, and respect.

8. What if attending is not action guiding?

One can worry that attending cannot guide moral agency. This worry, of course, is all the more relevant when we construe moral agency in relation to a specific decision, especially situations presenting dilemmas. For instance, one might worry that attending does not guide a medical practitioner who has to choose between two patients who need urgent care, when only one can be treated. There are two ways to answer the worry that attending is not action guiding. The first is to answer the question whether attending can reveal final reasons to the agent—guide her in choosing what to do by providing a *tool* to choose between competing reasons. In this case, the answer is *no*, but this is not a problem because this is not the point of attending. The second is to answer the question whether attending guides action in another way. Here the answer is *yes*. Attending is action guiding because it improves one's moral epistemic wherewithal. To answer this worry, it is important to remind ourselves that the present discussion broadens the scope of moral agency. Moral agency is also present when one's different epistemic abilities collaborate to promote competency as a whole. Ethical life, in other words, is portrayed as an ongoing activity and not as uniting a number of punctual decisions. As such, attending is action guiding because it brings the agent into contact with features central to navigate ethical life. Within this framework, one who attends not only proves to be more competent to live with others (e.g. the difference I press via the comparison of Merrick and Clements), but one is also better prepared if one has to choose between the two horns of a dilemma.

Attending is especially relevant within ordinary ethical life. It is pertinent to people who, with their families, friends, colleagues, and as citizens, consumers, community members, generally desire to live well. The problem with someone like Judge S. is not that she is a bad person, in the sense of not being in touch with universal moral principles (being fair, being helpful, being kind, not hurting others, and so on). The problem is that Judge S., despite recognizing such principles, often fails to see where and how they apply within her daily life—she has low moral epistemic wherewithal. Attending targets an interesting kind of moral

shortcoming—because Judge S. would be appalled were she to recognize how unfair her views are. The problem, to put it simply, is that she overlooks something important within the fabric of common, daily situations. Her shortcoming is not (only) a failure about what she chooses, but one in what she attends to and feels. Note, however, that when Judge S.'s outlook changes, through attending, this will help guide her actions.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to analyze Iris Murdoch's challenge of the ego and her notion of moral attention with the help of the Structuring Mind theory of attention, to better characterize the nature of these two moral phenomena, how they are related, and how they relate to moral agency. I first presented Murdoch's challenge of the ego, characterizing as "blind spots" the epistemic problems raised by the ego. Then I presented the notion of moral attention. I argued that Murdoch suggests, in her analysis of the epistemic problems created by the ego, not one, but two attentional activities: that of attention and that of moral attention. The first is influenced by the ego. The second is a moral activity that should counteract the deleterious effects of the ego. My goal was then to provide an analysis of both attentional activities with the help of the Structuring Mind theory of attention. Before turning to this analysis, I suggested that we should consider the ego not as an enemy, but as a referencing system that organizes experience into a sense of self. Although the ego sustains some worrisome moral shortcomings, it can be a fertile starting point from which to better understand ourselves and the range of our moral agency.

After presenting the Structuring Mind theory of attention, which argues that attention is an activity that organizes the mind into priority structures, I argued that the ego is an active form of attention guidance, a form of motivational penetration, that impinges on passive attention guidance. The ego guides attention in accordance with a subject's usual references, and thus organizes and constrains the subject's experience in a way that often departs from her deeper concerns and leaves important parts of reality in the dark. I then argued that to cope with the ego's deleterious effects, new priority structures need to arise. Moral attention or "attending," as I named it, is a form of attention actively guided with low control, which can give rise to new priority structures. This kind of attentional activity is supported by the Structuring Mind theory of attention as it is a combination of active and passive attention guidance. When attending, a moral agent is poised to receive (see, hear, look at, listen to, notice, be present to, etc.) particular realities that confront her. As a result, the subject is actively guiding attention outward, which opens experience and tones down the referencing activities

of the ego. The subject's direct relation to her experience, provided by attending, disengages the usual workings of the ego for short intervals, where ethical reality can be revealed. In moments of attending, one's deep ethical concerns guide how attention organizes experience. Attending is an activity that is not governed by a qualified goal and is exercised in mundane activities like praying and reading. While attending cannot provide a moral agent with final reasons about what she should do, it nevertheless provides her with epistemic moral wherewithal and thus guides her ethical navigation.

The analysis provided in this chapter gives us new tools to understand Murdoch's suggestion that there is a "contemplative" aspect to moral agency—actively doing nothing, just "sitting with" the problem. This discussion was necessary to further characterize the humble epistemic engagement that, as I argued in Chapter 3, comprises an essential part of ethical navigation. This discussion now provides us with a plausible explanation of the underpinnings of an ordinary lack of moral understanding: an ordinary moral agent's navigation fails when blind spots, sustained by the ego, conceal moral considerations from her, and thereby prevent appreciation. Attending guides other epistemic abilities and disengages the workings of the ego. It is, as such, a pillar of one's humble epistemic engagement. It is not that doubting, exploring, imagining possibilities, and so on is impossible without attending, but that the clear-sightedness secured by attending allows one to navigate in a way that other epistemic abilities alone cannot. As I said at the end of Chapter 3, one cannot navigate if one does not feel, but one needs to see before one can feel. This discussion has brought to the fore some elements of interplay between attention, attending, and emotions. On the one hand, Judge S. and M are led astray by their emotions—as their contempt and jealousy remain high in their priority structures, their experience is constrained and their prejudices enforced. On the other hand, emotional experience has guiding virtues, as we saw with the example of Huck Finn, whose affection and respect for Jim allowed a timely perspective shift. Attending keeps one open-minded such that new information can enter one's priority structure—seeing the world beyond one's usual references (biases, prejudices, etc.). Might we then suspect that attending creates conditions under which advantageous emotions can arise, as happened to Huck? Might we also suspect, as was the case with M's jealousy, that attending can be necessary to first dislodge an emotion before the right emotion occurs? While some emotions appear to have a positive dynamic with attending, others appear to support the ego. As we will see in the following chapter, though emotions can sometimes have deleterious influences, they nevertheless have two distinct roles to play in the account of moral understanding I defend. For, in as much as emotions capture and maintain our attention on emotional objects, they are one of the epistemic

abilities that can drive humble epistemic engagement. Moreover, in virtue of their distinct phenomenology, emotions reveal, as Huck's emotions made manifest to him, what a moral situation demands of one.

Chapter 5

Appreciation and emotional insight

> "Taste" is an experience: by tasting something you know whether it is sweet or bitter or salty. You know by yourself whether something is cold or warm. Those who live only on the level of words and letters, for whom all things are conceptual, do not really taste.
> (Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Nihon teki reisei*)

Introduction

I have argued thus far that moral understanding is the competence to navigate ethical life successfully. To safely sail to harbor, one needs the abilities to be humbly epistemically engaged and to appreciate moral reasons. One appreciates moral reasons, as I argued in Chapter 2, if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do. If that is correct, then a certain kind of experience is necessary to reveal the reason-giving character of moral situations. One can only fully appreciate the ways in which moral facts relate to one's decisions and actions, if one experiences them as reason-giving. We need *normative experience* for moral judgments not to remain theoretical. Experiencing moral reasons as reason-giving is inherently tied to how we come to grasp the goal of our moral practices. We now need, as a last step in the development of this account of moral understanding, a better idea of the nature of this experience.

In this chapter, I argue that one experiences the importance of moral considerations, and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do, through emotional experiences. These considerations are not important because one feels a certain way. Rather, one feels for the character given by moral considerations. As we will see, a close examination of the phenomenology of emotion reveals that a situation's demanding character is tied to its importance. Not all emotional experiences reveal the demanding character of moral considerations, but correct emotional experience does. To argue for these claims, I first lay the grounds with a discussion of the key features of normative experience in Section 1. Within this discussion, I consider but reject the view that normative character is presented by experiences of prescriptive affordances. We have stronger reasons, I argue, to consider emotional experiences as the right candidates. In Section 2, I present emotions and their intimate relation to evaluative properties. For, as we will see, the demanding character of moral considerations can be given through emotional experiences because they are experiences of value. Emotions

are finally good for the epistemology of normative properties, so I will argue from Sections 3 to 5, because their distinct phenomenology is necessary to understand what an evaluative situation demands of one. In Section 3, I consider the view that emotion makes a positive epistemic contribution to our evaluative understanding by capturing and maintaining our attention on emotional objects. Discussing this view allows me to situate emotion as one of the epistemic abilities that can drive humble epistemic engagement and to motivate the claim that granting them only this instrumental role understates emotions' epistemic potential. I give reasons to accept that emotional phenomenology is necessary for moral competence in Section 4, and in Section 5 I defend an account of emotional experience characterized by three phenomenal constraints (importance, self-engagement, action-readiness). It is the experience of these three constraints together that reveals the normative character of values.

1. Normative experience

Let us start by considering what a normative experience is. Recall from Chapter 2 that one appreciates moral reasons experientially. A certain kind of experience, that is, presents moral reasons to us under a normative light—a normative experience. It is an experience whereby a moral agent grasps the importance of the considerations that demand actions (or attitudes). Through this experience, demands come to speak to one's agency. Importantly, I contended that such an experience is necessary for a moral agent to form a belief of the form "*I* should Φ" (e.g. "*I* should be honest"): a self-engaging practical belief. A self-engaging practical belief is a belief through which one makes moral reasons one's own. To see that a normative experience is necessary to form a self-engaging practical belief, we can think of the way children develop their appreciation of moral reasons. How does a child who is told that there are reasons to be honest come to form the belief that *she* has reasons to be honest? While adults can offer guidance, children need to experience moral situations themselves to be made aware of the importance of the demands which moral considerations place on them. This contrasts with cases where one believes that there is a reason—that (some)one should Φ—which speaks to no one in particular.

Although they speak to our agency, normative reasons demand actions independently of our preferences or inclinations. For example, Steve has reasons to stay with his elderly father for the holidays, even if he prefers to travel to tropical destinations. My point here is that Steve is made sensitive to this reason through a normative experience. The experience in question is not that of him not traveling, but rather that which comes prior to the moment when he forms

the belief "*I* should stay with father."[110] Steve forms this self-engaging belief following a normative experience. Through normative experience reasons for actions come to figure in one's practical belief such that they do not remain a theoretical idea. They do not remain, for instance, the distant thought that "one should care for one's elderly parents."

Normative reasons are considerations that *favor* or *demand* certain actions or attitudes. For the rest of this chapter, I will say that normative reasons are considerations that *demand* certain actions or attitudes. Moral reasons, like prudential, aesthetic or epistemic reasons, are a subset of normative reasons. Moral reasons are considerations that demand moral actions and attitudes. For instance, if a situation is *unjust*, then there is a reason to protest against it or to rectify the situation; in general, to disapprove of it. Similarly, if an action is *cruel*, then there is a reason to stop or boycott the action; in general, to disapprove of it. Or again, if a person *suffers*, then her suffering gives a reason to help her and to try to alleviate her plight—in general, it gives a reason to care for the person. Injustice, cruelty, and suffering are moral considerations that demand certain actions or attitudes. For the rest of this chapter, unless otherwise specified, I use "normative reasons" and "moral reasons" interchangeably.[111]

One might worry that the experience I want to bring to our attention is tied to one's desires, that being sensitive to moral reasons is, as internalists about reasons claim, tied to a desire or motive one has to act on this reason. If this is the case, then one might worry that this experience loses its prescriptive force. Two things are worth noting here. First, having a normative experience might be tied to a desire, as internalists would claim, but this desire is one that our "best" self would have; it is not just any desire. According to internalists, "we have a normative reason to do something as long as we would have the desire to do it if we thought about it in the right way" (Tiberius 2015, 53) (e.g. when Steve thinks about it in the right way, he recognizes that he has a desire to care for his elderly father). So, even if internalists are correct, this does not diminish the prescriptive force of the experience. The second thing to note is, importantly, that normative experience actually renders Steve sensitive to reasons, even if he does not initially think about it in the right way. This is precisely the force of this experience. That is, even if Steve's mind is occupied by thoughts about tropical destinations

[110] We need to distinguish, that is, between the actions one carries out and the beliefs one forms about what one should do to allow for cases of weakness of will or cases of conative disengagement, like depression (see Chapter 2, Section 3.2).

[111] The nature of normative reasons is the object of philosophical debate and it is not my aim here to discuss the metaphysics of normative reasons. My aim in this chapter is to provide a possible account of the way in which the demanding character of normative reasons is experienced by the subject. It marks an attempt to describe normative experience.

(he dreams of warm beaches to save him from the cold winter), given the right conditions a normative experience allows him to form the belief that he should stay with his elderly father. The right conditions might simply be that he sees, upon his most recent visit to his father, how much the latter needs his care and presence. There is, then, a risk that moral considerations remain hidden from one's direct experience. This would prevent the normative experience from arising. This risk supports the need for a moral agent to be epistemically engaged through attending, to allow moral considerations to be seen and to guide one's experience, as I argued in the previous chapter.

What is the nature of this normative experience? We are looking to describe an experience that makes one sensitive to structures of importance. However, merely being sensitive to structures of importance is not sufficient. There is, in addition, a certain quality to a normative experience that reveals importance in the way that it does. A normative experience is one wherein a subject is "struck by" a certain thing that is to be done; the demand appears self-evident. We are looking, then, for an attitude with a phenomenology of something being evident as needing to be done, something imposing itself as needing to be done. Jean Moritz Müller (2021) suggests that the prescriptive force of normative reasons is presented via the experience of *prescriptive affordances*. A normative experience, according to this suggestion, is an experience of prescriptive affordances. In the next section, I consider Müller's suggestion which proves helpful in singling out characteristics central to normative experiences. In the end, I will nevertheless reject the idea that normative experiences are experiences of prescriptive affordances. Instead, for the rest of the chapter, I will argue that normative experiences are emotional experiences.

1.1 Experience of prescriptive affordances

Prescriptive affordances are psychological states that account for how we are presented with the demanding character of normative reasons, according to Müller (2021). Müller takes normative reasons to make demands in the form of an imposed claim for us to Φ: "For something to favor *Φ*ing is for it to impose a certain claim on us to *Φ*" (Müller 2021, 3562). Prescriptive affordances are perceivable action opportunities that demand something: "These are experiences of the environment as demanding or mandating action" (Müller 2021, 3571). For instance, a person who invades your personal space by standing too close to you can create a situation that demands that you back away. Affordances are opportunities for (bodily) action

made available by one's perceptible surroundings.[112] For instance, a cup filled with water has the property of being "drinkable from." Prescriptive affordances are affordances with a specifically prescriptive character. In that respect, they are not only perceptions of opportunities, but perceptions of demands. Experiences of prescriptive affordances capture the idea that one is struck by a demand and thus compelled to act: the person standing too close to you *strikes* you as to be backed away from. Müller argues that prescriptive affordances best capture key characteristics of the presentation of the demanding character of normative reasons.[113] The first is that the experience, as already mentioned, is one in which something *strikes* one as needing to be done. Second, normative reasons are presented through a *non-voluntary attitude*—an attitude whose adoption is beyond our control. Third, presentations of normative reasons are *compelling*—not only do they incline one to assent to what is presented, but they incline one to assent to a certain response: "They compel their subject to act as the presented reason prescribes" (Müller 2021, 3564). A strength of this account should be that prescriptive affordances accommodate these key characteristics of normative experiences: they are striking, non-voluntary, and compelling.

Relying on prescriptive affordances commits Müller's account, as he himself recognizes, to rely on rather mysterious aspects of our psychology. This is a weakness of his account which he attempts to dissipate with an analysis of prescriptive affordances as a type of aspectual presentations.[114] At this point, however, we might be tempted to take stock of the lessons of his discussion and ask whether prescriptive affordances really are the mental attitudes best suited to elucidate the nature of normative experiences. Can the three key characteristics perhaps not be met by a more common psychological phenomenon? Emotions might serve as an alternative candidate. Emotions, for one, as when we say that we are "struck by fear," "overcome by sadness" or "taken by surprise," are commonly accepted as reactions that we passively undergo—emotions are non-voluntary psychological phenomena. We do not form an emotion as we would form a judgment. The locution of being "struck" by an emotion also suggests that these experiences have the particularly gripping character typical of normative experiences.[115] Lastly, emotions compel us to act in response to the situation that

[112] The notion of an affordance is associated with the work of psychologist J.J. Gibson (1979).
[113] I discuss what I take to be the three most relevant characteristics here. Müller, following Bengson (2015), also mentions that presentations of normative character are baseless, gradable, and apt to rationalize (see Müller 2021, Section 3).
[114] See Müller 2021, Section 6 and Müller 2019, Chapter 5.
[115] For an introduction to basic characteristics of emotional experiences, see Deonna and Teroni 2012, Chapter 1.

prompted them.[116] We can think, for instance, of a person who, because she feels ashamed of her mediocre dance performance, rapidly goes into hiding, not wanting to be seen by the public. I will come back to the nature of emotional experience in the following sections, but for now we can just accept that this mental phenomenon is also a valid candidate to account for the presentation of normative reasons.

Müller, before presenting his account of prescriptive affordances, argues that emotions are not suitable candidates for presentations of normative reasons because their intentionality differs too substantially from that of presentations. Emotional intentionality differs from presentations, he says, because emotions are directed at an object as *responses* (e.g. "Alain is indignant in response to injustice"). In this respect, emotions, as opposed to presentations, admit of the question *why* (e.g. "Why is Alain indignant?"). Presentations, as forms of perceptual experiences, do not admit *why* questions—one cannot ask *why* Paula sees a blue vase. While we might sympathize with Müller's reservations about emotions—emotional experiences do, after all, generally differ from perceptual experiences—we might nevertheless want to consider that presentations of the demanding character of normative reasons do allow for the question *why*. For instance, if Kim has reasons to help her brother move—i.e. she experiences the world as demanding that she helps her brother move—we can legitimately ask why (e.g. "I need to help my brother move because he has no one else to help him"). This seems to also be the case with prescriptive affordances. When someone strikes you as to be backed away from, we can legitimately ask a why question (e.g. "Why does she strike you as to be backed away from?" "Because she is standing too close to me"). Hence, perhaps what should be questioned is whether presentations of normative character really are so akin to perceptual experiences.

Perceptual experiences might provide access to normative properties, but they do not guarantee access to this property's demanding character. The phenomenology of perceptual experiences, that is, seems to differ from that of normative experiences. I would like to press here the difference between normative *judgments* and normative *experience.* While a perceptual experience might justify a normative judgment in virtue of its presentational character (e.g. "This ought to be done"), the phenomenon that I seek to characterize here (and which I take Müller as seeking to characterize) is not that of forming a normative judgment, but that of experiencing normative character. One can make a normative judgment without experiencing the normative *force* of normative properties. In this respect, while perceptual

[116] On the idea that a defining trait of emotional experiences is their motivational character, see Scarantino 2015.

experience can justify normative judgments, it does not guarantee or even enable one to appreciate the normative force of moral reasons. The phenomenology of emotions seems better equipped, as I will argue below, to account for the experience of demands. Whereas there is no demanding character in perceptual experiences—perceptual experiences present us with features of the world, but do not demand anything from us (e.g. seeing a blue vase does not present it in any favoring light)—emotions do present to us objects of the world in a favoring light. We might take Müller to agree, at least implicitly, with the shortcomings of perceptual phenomenology because he modifies common accounts of affordances into prescriptive ones to accommodate the right phenomenology. Lastly, another reason why emotions are better candidates than perceptual states for presentations of normative reasons is that they rely on cognitive bases—belief, perception, imagination, memory, testimony, etc.—for the information they are about (e.g. "Alain is indignant as he remembers the oppression of French Canadians during the Great Darkness," "Paola feels compassion as her trustworthy friend tells her about the suffering of ferrets raised for fur"). Given that emotions rely on cognitive bases, like perceptions, we can better appreciate the difference between being presented with reasons-giving features perceptually and affectively: one can access a normative property perceptually and this perception can act as the cognitive base of one's emotion (e.g. the perception of injustice is the cognitive base of one's indignation).

Defending an account of normative experience as emotional experience requires, however, to make a concession. With his account of prescriptive affordances, Müller wants to provide an account of our direct experience to normative reasons. An account based on emotional experience does not offer this direct experiential route. An account of normative experience based on emotional experience is one in which the experience of normative reasons supervenes on evaluative experience. Emotional experiences, so the orthodoxy has it, are intimately tied to evaluative properties, a point I will explain in the following section. It is in virtue of this relation that we will find our way to the experience of reasons. This is a price Müller wanted to avoid paying and it is why he distinguishes between the presentation of normative reasons and that of evaluative properties. The apprehension of normative reasons is supposed to differ from that of evaluative properties: "to apprehend an evaluative property that is plausibly also a normative reason (e.g. to grasp the injustice of some policy) is not the same as apprehending its character as favoring a certain conduct or attitude (e.g. disapproval or protest)" (Müller 2021, 3559). The worry is that one could be presented with evaluative facts without experiencing them as reasons to act. This is not a problem, however, if we accept that the considerations constituting normative reasons are evaluative properties (a point I accepted

in Chapter 2, Section 3). In the next section, I describe the nature of the intimate relation between emotions and evaluative properties. Then, in the rest of the chapter, I defend the claim that emotional experiences constitute normative experiences.

2. Emotion and values

We are *angry* because a person insulted us. We *admire* a family member for her courage. We feel *compassion* toward a colleague who is suffering. Our emotional lives are tied to certain objects, events or situations that have value, more specifically they exemplify *values*. We say that emotions relate us to objects of the world in an evaluative light.[117] Evaluative properties or values (I will use these terms interchangeably), like the offensive, the admirable or suffering, are properties which objects, events or situations may instantiate. A remark can exemplify the value of being *offensive* or courage can constitute something *admirable*. The relation between emotions and values concerns that with evaluative properties and not that with, for instance, a nation's values (equality or liberty) or a person's values (integrity, reliability). Attribution of evaluative properties only distantly relates to our folk attributions of value, although our sensibility to values does guide our folk evaluative practices. In this respect, emotions, in virtue of their relation to values, actually seem to convey something important: "they are in some way about things we care about or things that matter to us" (Tiberius 2015, 71).

What are emotions and how, more specifically, do they relate to values? Emotions differentiate themselves from other affective states, like moods for instance, in that they are about something in the world. For instance, Paul's anger is *about* the offensiveness of Sonia's comment. Moreover, unlike moods, they can also be assessed in light of conditions of correctness (e.g. Paul's anger is correct if and only if the comment *is* offensive). Emotions also differentiate themselves from other intentional psychological states with correctness conditions, like perceptions and beliefs, because of their salient phenomenology, the *what-it-is-likeness*—to use the common expression—of emotional experiences (e.g. there is a characteristic way it is like for Paul to experience anger). Hence, emotions are intentional states that answer to standards of correctness and have a salient phenomenology.[118]

[117] For further discussion on the relation between emotions and values, see Mulligan 1998; Deonna and Teroni 2012, Chapter 4; 2014; Tappolet 2016, Chapter 3.
[118] For more on these three fundamental features of emotions, see Deonna and Teroni 2012, Chapter 1. For more on the nature of emotions see, for a philosophical perspective, Goldie 2000, and for a psychological perspective, Cornelius 1996.

We need a better understanding of the intentionality of emotions to understand their relation to values. Emotions are about something in the world, we say, in that they are reactions to events, objects or situations in the world (e.g. one is insulted by a colleague and becomes enraged; upon learning of the death of a close friend, one feels devastated; after a glorious sporting victory, one glows with pride). There is always an object (whether experienced, remembered, imagined, and so on) which we have emotions about—emotions' *intentional objects*. This description alone is insufficient to qualify emotional intentionality because we can have a variety of different emotions toward the same object. Let us consider, for instance, that while one feels anger toward a colleague's disrespectful comment, the colleague herself might feel satisfaction because she thinks the person deserved it. Or again, rather than feeling angry toward the comment, one feels puzzled because one does not know whether one's colleague is right. To accommodate the fact that the same object—in this case, a comment—can elicit different emotional responses, philosophers make a further distinction to characterize the intentionality of emotions, between their *particular* and their *formal* object. Thus, one's anger is about a comment—a *particular object*—but it is also about the disrespectful character of the comment—a *formal object*.[119] The distinction between the particular and the formal object of emotions is supported by the observation that different occurrences of emotion are unified by means of their formal object (e.g. all occurrences of anger have in common that they apprehend a situation as offensive). It is, moreover, generally accepted that evaluative properties are the formal objects of emotions: "having an emotion amounts to apprehending the object of the emotion in evaluative terms" (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 40).

Formal objects capture the familiar idea that one takes a particular object as having a certain worth through one's emotion (e.g. one takes a comment to be bad because it is disrespectful, whereas the colleague takes it to be good because it is deserved). This is not to say, however, that the attitude one takes toward an object gives it its value. The value is not, that is, in the eye of the beholder. If it were, then we could not assess emotions for correctness. If the assessment of correctness is to have any grounds, then the subject's apprehension of a value and the actual exemplification of this value must have some independence from one another. We can specify standards of correctness for emotions because they have a particular and formal object. An emotional episode is said to be correct if and only if its formal object is instantiated by the particular object about which the emotion is felt (e.g. one's anger at an offensive comment is correct if and only if that comment is offensive; one's admiration of a

[119] For a discussion on the nature and role of the formal objects of emotions, see Teroni 2007.

relative's actions is correct if and only if those actions are admirable).[120] Emotions are thus cognitive states similar to many others, like beliefs and perceptual experiences, that "have a content in the light of which it is possible to assess whether they fit the facts or not" (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 6; see also (Searle 1999)). While some might be uneasy with the idea of evaluating one's emotions—is our emotional life not off limits to such stringency?—the practice of assessing our emotions is actually a common one. We will, for instance, tell a child who is afraid of a friendly and safe dog not to be afraid because the dog poses no danger. Although we would understand that the child might be afraid, the guidance we offer shows that we take the fear to be inappropriate to the situation. Hence, if the claim about the epistemic import of emotional experiences is to have any substance, then the present discussion presupposes that it is correct emotional experiences that play an epistemic role and not just any emotional experiences. The present discussion does not deny that some emotional experiences can be misleading, but it takes, as will be argued in the following sections, correct emotional experiences to be not only suitable, but even necessary guides.

With a better understanding of the nature of emotions and their relation to values in hand, we might ask whether all emotions are relevant to the present discussion. There are many more emotions than there are *moral* emotions, and many more values than *ethical* values. Recall from Chapter 2 the difference between *thin* and *thick* evaluative properties. Terms picked out by thin values, such as "good," "bad," "better than," are common currency in moral discourse, but so are a wide range of terms picking out thick ethical evaluative properties, such as admirable, caring, contemptible, courageous, cruel, generous, honest, regrettable, respectful, shameful, and suffering. These thick evaluative properties are the formal object of moral emotions, or emotions which, like admiration, if they are not typical moral emotions, are nevertheless morally relevant. Common pairings of ethical values and moral emotions include the contemptible and contempt, the morally disgusting and disgust, suffering and compassion, caring and a form of love or solicitude, the morally admirable and admiration, and injustice and indignation.[121] Hence, admiration, contempt, disgust, indignation, love, and solicitude are all moral or morally relevant emotions. We might not have sufficiently fine-grained emotional concepts to capture all evaluative phenomena, but that does not impinge on the diversity of emotional phenomena themselves. For instance, the correct emotion we feel toward cruelty

[120] About different standards to which emotions are subject, see, for instance D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; Tappolet 2011.

[121] For a thorough survey of the variety of emotions that contribute, in one way or another, to moral life, see Roberts 2003, Chapter 3.

(unfair suffering) would seem to be an emotion that combines compassion and indignation—we feel for the other's suffering, but we are at the same time angered by the unfair treatment. Or again, if we consider that justice is the equal consideration of the interests of all those involved, then the correct emotion one feels once justice is reached would be a form of peaceful or joyful satisfaction. One will rest uneasy (be troubled, angered) as long as justice is not achieved. I assume, as I have said above, that moral considerations are constituted by thick evaluative properties. The relation, then, between reasons and values is, for instance, that a disrespectful comment gives one a reason to apologize (if one made the comment in question) or to become upset and signify that one was disrespected (if one is the target of the comment). Disrespect, a form of offense, is a consideration that demands certain actions and attitudes. It is generally agreed that offense is the formal object of anger (and other anger-related emotions such as indignation, irritation, outrage, righteous anger). One's anger at another's comment is correct if and only if the comment *is* disrespectful.[122]

I have presented in this section the relation between emotions and values. In the following sections, I will defend the idea that this intimate relation confers emotions with an epistemic role which has been underrecognized in the literature. While it was once thought that emotions are disruptive forces that should not influence or drive moral reflection,[123] most philosophers today agree that these mental states play some desirable role in our moral lives.[124] Emotions are considered morally significant, for instance, in as much as they can motivate one to act on one's moral judgment, perhaps even reliably so under certain conditions (see Tiberius 2015, Chapter 5). Recently, philosophers have also insisted, for instance, that emotions are an important part of our moral experience because they can help us form moral beliefs and perhaps also gain moral knowledge.[125] A suggestion that has also recently grown in popularity is that emotions contribute to or are constitutive of moral understanding (e.g. Starkey 2008; Brady 2013; Callahan 2018). I will argue that emotional experiences play a necessary epistemic role in gaining moral understanding because they reveal normative character. Emotions are finally good for the epistemology of normative properties, so I will argue in Sections 4 and 5, because they are necessary to understand what an evaluative situation demands of one.

[122] About the moral relevance of anger and its relation to offense see Greenspan 1988, 48–55; Bell 2009.
[123] The Stoics are a good example of philosophers who held this view. Also Kant, at least in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. See Baltzly 2019 or Blackburn 1998.
[124] For a general discussion of the moral significance of emotions see Oakley 1992; Roberts 2003; Bagnoli and Greenspan 2015.
[125] Linda Zagzebski (2003) argues that the most basic forms of moral judgments are emotional. For a defense of the necessary and sufficient role of emotions to make moral judgments see Prinz 2006, and Jones 2006, for a reply that nuances Prinz's claims.

Before defending this claim, I first want to consider the view that emotional experience contributes instrumentally to evaluative (and moral) understanding by capturing and maintaining our attention on emotional objects. This view will serve to situate emotional experience within the framework of moral understanding I have articulated thus far. For, as we will see, emotion drives an exploration into our evaluative situation that can facilitate the formation of justified evaluative beliefs. In this respect, emotional experience also supports the kind of epistemic engagement I have presented as a condition to have moral understanding in Chapter 3. We need, however, to move beyond this view of emotional insight to specify how emotions reveal normative character. The account of emotional insight I will defend, rather than emphasizing the role of emotions in making justified evaluative judgments, instead centers on the role that emotional phenomenology plays in experiencing the demands of an evaluative situation. If this is correct, then emotional experiences play a dual epistemic role: that of facilitating evaluative judgments and that of revealing the demanding character of values.

3. Guided by emotional insight: experiencing, judging, searching

Emotions provide us with evaluative understanding, according to Michael S. Brady (2010; 2013), because they direct attention toward and keep attention focused on important objects and events. Maintaining one's attention increases one's motivation to better understand one's evaluative situation. One thus better understands, for instance, "the dangerousness of the neighborhood, the shamefulness of the drunken behavior, the adorableness of the beloved" (Brady 2013, 139). Brady argues that emotions capture and consume our attention in such a way that we search for the reasons that have a bearing on the accuracy of our emotional responses: we look for whether there are reasons to feel the way we feel (e.g. experiencing indignation directs one's attention toward and maintains it on the emotional object—injustice—and makes one search for the reasons why it is exemplified; why, for instance, a colleague's behavior is unjust). As such, emotions facilitate the search for and discovery of the reasons why an event, object or situation exemplifies a given evaluative property. These are the reasons that bear on the exemplification of the value, and the reasons that bear on emotional accuracy (e.g. discovering the reasons why a behavior is unjust explains why it is unjust and also confirms the correctness of one's indignation). Understanding, for instance, dangerousness, shamefulness, adorableness, consists in, according to Brady, grasping connections between pieces of information: "grasping […] that it was important to maintain a polite and formal atmosphere for the honored guests, that my crude stories were embarrassing

for my hosts and the visitors, that my colleagues now regard me as rude and inept in social situations—and the shamefulness of my behavior" (Brady 2013, 140). One has evaluative understanding when one understands the reasons why a value is exemplified (e.g. one understands why one's behavior is shameful). The evaluative situation we understand must not only make sense for us, but it must represent how the world really is arranged in terms of relations (causal or explanatory) (Brady 2013, 141).

Emotional experiences, according to Brady's account, are epistemically valuable because they increase our chances of understanding our evaluative situation. Without such experiences, he argues, we would become disinterested in the emotional object (i.e. the particular object of the emotions that instantiates a value): "If emotion fades prior to the search for and discovery of reasons, then there is a tendency for such inquiry to halt" (Brady 2013, 147). Brady's account of emotional insight provides support for the claim that emotions cannot be likened to perceptions (see Section 1.1). He argues that emotional experiences do not play the same justificatory role as perceptual experiences: whereas perceptions are usually (excepting special conditions) sufficient reasons to believe that an evaluative property obtains, emotions only function as proxy reasons for this evaluative belief. For instance, one's perception of a blue vase is sufficient for one to believe that there is a blue vase in front of one. By contrast, Brady argues that, for instance, one's contempt toward one's colleague provides a *pro tempore* reason to believe that the colleague is contemptible. The *pro tempore* reason stands in for the real reason to believe that the colleague is contemptible. One cannot indefinitely rely on one's emotion to justify one's evaluative judgment. Eventually, one needs to search for the *genuine* reasons that justify this judgment (e.g. what the colleague has done or failed to do, her behavior or lack of concern, etc.)

We are better off epistemically, Brady argues, searching for the genuine reasons because emotional experiences would otherwise stand in as reasons to believe in the same way that testimony gives us a reason to believe. Forming our evaluative beliefs on the basis of proxy reasons, that is, is of lesser epistemic worth than becoming aware of the genuine reasons. Brady argues against reliance on proxy reasons for the same reasons some are pessimists about moral testimony, as we can recall from Chapter 1: because forming our beliefs on the basis of genuine reasons promotes understanding. For instance, while one knows that a bull is dangerous because of the farmer's warning sign ("Warning, Beware of Bull"), one can also understand why a bull is dangerous by recognizing the danger-making features of the animal. As Brady writes: "Awareness of these reasons, as opposed to the other sorts of reasons, like the farmer's sign or the rambler's testimony, therefore facilitates understanding of or insight into our

evaluative situation" (Brady 2013, 136). According to Brady's account, an agent not only feels a certain way, but she then, *thanks to her emotional state*, explores and questions her evaluative situation to gain a better understanding of it. In this respect, we would have reasons not to accept what our emotions say at face value, but to rely on their help to enhance our epistemic standing.

If Brady is right to claim that emotional experiences typically engage us in an exploration of our evaluative situation, then this suggests that emotions can be further epistemic abilities that support one's humble epistemic engagement. This serves to situate emotions within the view of moral epistemic competence I have been defending until now. Brady argues that emotional experiences (should) typically engage us in a search for the reasons why an evaluative property is exemplified. Emotional experiences engage us in an exploration of our evaluative situation because they consume our attention over a period of time, thus prompting us to question our situation: Is it really dangerous? Was I really shameful? This exploration has the double benefit of confirming why we have reasons to believe that our evaluative situation is as it seems, and of confirming the correctness of the emotion itself. This is morally important, because, as I argued in the previous chapter, one's experience (including one's emotional experience) can lead one astray. Let us recall, for instance, Judge S. who feels contempt toward Rita. Judge S.'s contempt fuels her prejudices and thus tampers with her moral experience and moral beliefs. If Brady is right, then Judge S. could engage in a search for the reasons why Rita leads her to feel contempt. This could allow her to discover that Rita is not contemptible and to readjust her beliefs accordingly. Similarly with M's jealousy or Clements's hubris. Emotions, while contributing to their blind spots, might also be the very resources, insofar as they maintain one's attention on the emotional object, needed to rectify such shortcomings.

Brady's account, with its emphasis on the way emotions capture attention, seems to describe a relation between attention and emotion, similar to what Sebastian Watzl names *emotional attention*. According to both accounts, emotions drive attention. Attention, as we can recall from the previous chapter, is the activity of the mind that forms priority structures. Emotional attention maintains an emotional state at the top of the priority structure, according to Watzl. It is not only the emotional object that is maintained at the top, but the state of feeling an emotion about something. Anger, for instance, transforms into "angrily attending" and organizes a priority structure such that "*a state of being angry at (or about) o* is top priority in S [the relevant structure]" (Watzl 2017, 86). Moreover, the emotional experience, as Watzl writes, "like a rush of anger may not just occupy our subject's attention, it can also be experienced as commanding and holding her attention" (Watzl 2017, 216). Emotions, acting

as psychological saliences, thus represent a command: "Pay attention!" Hence emotions maintain the emotional object (e.g. the offense, the danger, the injustice) at the center of the priority structure within the emotional light. One might say that emotions do not promote the desired kind of exploration if the emotion is not correct—if its formal object is not instantiated. That our emotional experience can misguide us gives us all the more reason to accept that one might not have an appropriate emotional response and to engage in the kind of exploration Brady describes. It might also take humility to disengage once one has realized that there really was no offense or that one really is not contemptible. Humility, a necessary attitude of the epistemic engagement I presented in Chapters 1 and 3, might be a useful addition to Brady's framework.

Although Brady's account makes the case that emotions play a facilitating role, it seems that the search for reasons can take place without them. There is, that is to say, a non-emotional route to the value-making features which emotion helps one discover. Emotional experience, according to this account, is instrumentally good. Moreover, while I believe that Brady is correct to claim that emotional experience provides us with underrecognized (even if instrumental) insight into our evaluative situation, his analysis of evaluative understanding presupposes that evaluative understanding is a form of explanatory understanding. The reasons one searches for, and hopefully discovers, thanks to the attentional capture afforded by emotions, are reasons that explain why an evaluative property is exemplified. These reasons justify evaluative beliefs, but they are not reasons for action. The reasons justifying an evaluative belief are often themselves non-evaluative. Injustice, for instance, is explained by the fact that two similar individuals are treated differently based on a morally irrelevant criterion. Or one's suffering is explained by the fact that a close relative has died. Brady's account of emotional insight relies on the Explanatory View of moral understanding I have presented in Chapter 2.[126] Relying on this view to account for the epistemic role of emotions raises the same limitations I have discussed in Chapter 2. According to Brady, emotions facilitate the *identification* of the reasons why values obtain. They facilitate, that is, the answer to a "why" question: Why is there the value that there is? (e.g. Why is it unfair? Why does she suffer?) His account of emotional insight thus suffers from the problem I raised with the distinction between *identifying* and *appreciating* moral reasons. According to Brady's account, emotions contribute instrumentally to the *identification* of reasons. However, I believe that this

[126] He frames his own views of evaluative and moral understanding by relying on Alison Hills's account of explanatory understanding.

understates the epistemic potential of emotions. Do emotions not, in addition perhaps to prompting us into the exploration Brady underlines, reveal situations to us under a certain light? A light that might make the difference between being a sympathetic observer, who can identify the reasons why an evaluative situation obtains and one who lives by the values disclosed by the emotion? If one identifies the reasons why an evaluative situation obtains because she is prompted by her emotional experience to search for those reasons, we might also reasonably suppose that, given this experience, she does not remain a sympathetic observer. If undergoing the correct emotional experience is key, then at the same time as one's emotions facilitate identification, the very fact that the emotional experience takes place should reveal the importance of the situation to the subject.

The difference I am pressing here is that between the instrumental role emotions play in facilitating the formation of justified evaluative judgments through the identification of the reasons why evaluative properties are exemplified, and the necessary role they play in experiencing the importance of values (e.g. experiencing the importance of not disrespecting others, of not deceiving others, of caring for others, and so on). The difference is that between *understanding why* the situation is evaluative and understanding *what the situation demands of one*. Understanding why injustice is exemplified is important to ascertain the truth of one's evaluative situation and the correctness of one's emotional experience. However, discovering value-making features, because it can be done via the non-emotional route, does not guarantee that one experiences this value as a consideration that demands certain actions.

Let us consider, to better appreciate the difference I am pressing, a situation where Paul, as he hikes in the Swiss Alps, encounters a young muscular bull. Paul makes the *evaluative judgment* that the bull is *dangerous* because he has big sharp horns, is very large, and is running toward him. Brady writes: "Now note that if we are aware of these features, and of the fact that the bull counts as dangerous in virtue of these features, then we are not simply possessed of the knowledge *that* the bull is dangerous" (Brady 2013, 136). That is, he means, we have gained understanding of our evaluative situation. This description, however, fails to account for an important aspect of Paul's experience. Paul is not just aware of the danger-making features of the situation; he is also *afraid* of the bull. Paul experiences *fear*. He can have access to information to judge that the bull is dangerous without his fear. However, the normative character of the situation is revealed to him through his experience of fear. Through his fear Paul experiences the importance of the situation—*this* situation requires his attention and issues commands: "Get out of the way!" "Run!" A reckless version of Paul, lacking the appropriate fear, would not be made aware that the situation demands that he protects himself. Paul's fear

is an experience of danger as giving him reasons to act. It is similar for other emotions, too. Through the experience of indignation, for instance, one experiences injustice as demading certain actions and attitudes of one; through the experience of compassion, one experiences another's suffering as demanding certain actions and attitudes of one. Hence, in addition to Brady's account of emotional insight, I claim that emotions play a necessary role in grasping the importance of values. In the next section, I want to further motivate the claim that emotional experience plays this necessary epistemic role by arguing that one faces a great loss, in the way one relates to evaluative and moral practices, if one cannot experience emotions.

4. The necessity of emotional insight

Emotional experiences make a necessary contribution to our moral competence, because, in addition to their instrumental role in identifying explanatory reasons, it is through emotional experiences that one can appreciate moral reasons. To accept this claim, we need to imagine a being who, having no affective life, cannot experience evaluative situations through its emotions. What kind of relation does a being fully devoid of emotions maintain with moral practices? Does she understand the goal of these practices? Or the goods these practices aim to preserve? As we can recall, one appreciates moral reasons if and only if one experiences the importance of moral considerations and thereby forms a self-engaging belief about what one should do. One can only appreciate the ways in which moral facts relate to one's decisions and actions if one experiences them as reason-giving, otherwise moral judgments remain theoretical. At this point in the argument, I contend that emotional experience is necessary to access the demanding character of moral reasons, and thus to grasp the goal of our moral practices. A non-affective being could perhaps gain and process information, such as to align with our evaluative and moral practices by relying on the non-emotional route to make evaluative judgments. However, a being deprived of emotional capacities would have to model all of her responses on the practices of emotional beings. If so, as Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni point out, the reasons why this being makes evaluative judgments are very different from our reasons:

> Her lack of emotional responses means that she cannot experience objects as giving her reasons to act in various and distinctive ways. Being deprived of the capacity to experience situations as offensive, shameful, or amusing for herself, the sense in which we may think of her as animated by concerns, such as staying decent, acting honorably, or cultivating her sense of humor, is elusive to say the least. She does not have any personal concern for staying decent, behaving honorably, or cultivating her sense of

> humor. Although she might succeed in blending in, as it were, such concerns could only be those of the people on whose responses she models her evaluative competence. If there is any point for her in making evaluative judgments, it is simply not the same as ours. (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 123).

We might rightly question whether a being devoid of emotional capacities could meangfully understand evaluative and moral practices. Such a being could not experience, for instance, the shamefulness of embarassing one's colleagues, the admirableness of a courageous person, the sadness of another person's suffering, compassion toward the cruelty of a treatment. A being who cannot experience how evaluative situations call on us for certain responses has an understanding that is very distinct from that of the emotional beings whose practices it is trying to blend in with. While a non-emotional being *could* take part in the moral community, it nevertheless could not experience moral practices in the way emotional beings do. Not understanding the goal of these practices, this being's moral understanding and, thereby, its moral competence are compromised.

Cases of antisocial personality disorders (psychopathy) present good examples of beings with acknowledged affective limitations. And, as we can recall from Chapter 3, some argue that psychopaths lack moral understanding because they are unable to appreciate how the values, interests, and emotions of others relate to their own actions. Psychopaths are, as we can also recall from Chapter 3, failed moral agents. Importantly, psychopaths show an incapacity for responses of love, remorse or concern for others—their affective lives are impaired (Duff 1977). The lack of understanding presented by psychopathic disorder pertains to paradigmatic human values: "A psychopath is not a rebel, who rejects more conventional values [for] some favored conception of the good: he is a man who has never come to understand […] this dimension of human life" (Duff 1977, 192). Indeed, while it is generally agreed that psychopaths can make something akin to moral judgments, their emotional ineptitude severely undermines their understanding of moral practices (see Nichols 2002; Tiberius 2015, Chapter 5).

The problem faced by one who lacks an emotional life is the impossibility of meeting moral situations through the disctinct phenomenology of emotional experiences. To appreciate that the difference is a phenomenological one, we can think about how a robot (another paradigmatic non-emotional figure) encounters moral situations.[127] We can perhaps imagine an android, such as the character Data in the television series *Star Trek*, that is designed to

[127] See, for instance, Rodogno 2016 for a defense of the view that robots do not understand the goals of our moral practices, and thus cannot be considered as full moral agents, because they have no affective lives.

resemble humans—but is not human. Robotics and artificial intelligence have reached a highly sophisticated stage today, with some believing that robots could be competent moral agents, at least in as much as they could issue moral judgments. A robot is programmed to take part in human life (in accordance with its expected function). In this respect, the answers it could give to moral situations are programmed to model human practices. While the algorithm animating the android could become autonomous, the difference is that robots are not phenomenologically embodied beings—their experience of the world is not rendered meaningful by their particular character, by the way these experiences distinctly feel.[128] This aspect remains central to differentiate our experience of the world from theirs (if, indeed, robots have "experiences" at all). Being phenomenologically embodied creatures radically impacts our perspective on the world, how we navigate our environment, how we answer considerations, and so on. A being without embodied experience has a radically different, if not impoverished, relation to considerations in favor of living its life one way rather than another. It is hard to believe, for instance, that a being who does not feel conflicted between difficult options, does not feel sad at the idea that a friend can be deeply hurt, does not feel disconcerted when a colleague is unfair, can really grasp the importance of moral practices. It is unclear how a being devoid of emotional experiences can be said to meaningfully relate the moral situations with which it is presented. If a robot can function within a moral community by processing information, living by ethical concerns appears radically different from the lives of ordinary moral agents. Hence, I take this to support the claim that emotions provide us with necessary insight into the nature of evaluative properties, and thus, into the goal of our moral practices. Until now, I have provided reasons to generally motivate the idea that emotions are necessary for moral competence. In the following section, I defend the main claim of this chapter, namely that emotions provide one with the experience of the demandingness of certain features of the world. Before I turn to this question, I need make two final clarifications.

How does emotional phenomenology enrich our experience of the world? The kind of phenomenal insight provided by emotional experiences is not, I should make clear, that, through this experience, the subject knows *what it is like to* undergo that experience. What is lacking in robots is not merely that they do not know what it is like to undergo emotional experiences. I do not deny that emotions are important to understand how it feels for someone to suffer, to be treated unfairly or for someone to be admirative, but this is not the kind of

[128] Some argue that artificial intelligences can be fully functional, such that they are like humans beings both in thought and feelings (Pollock 1995; Chella et al. 2019).

epistemic gain I defend here. The idea of *knowing what it is like* is often related to knowledge one has of sensory properties, like color properties: once Frank Jackson's Mary is released from her monochromatic room, she gains knowledge of what it is like to have a color experience. However, the difference between sensory properties and evaluative properties must be emphasized once again. Color properties, unlike evaluative properties, are not action-guiding properties. The phenomenal insight I insist on here does not have to do with what it is like to experience an emotion (that would be the direct analogy with the Mary example), but it is an insight in relation to the properties with which emotions share an intimate relation. As such, this phenomenal insight provides one with an understanding of how certain features of the world relate to one's life and engage one's concerns.

Brady argues that emotions capture and maintain one's attention on objects of "possible importance" or objects that are "important for one." However, if we accept, as I will argue in Section 5, that emotional experience has a demanding character (e.g. a dangerous situation demands of one that one protects oneself), then it is ambiguous in what way a situation is important for *that* person. In some cases, something is important for one (e.g. a parent's pride reveals that her child's footballing achievements are important for that parent—it is important for that parent that her child is good at football). Certain objects, events, and situations are, however, important independently of our personal preferences, projects, and goals—they are important in themselves. We might say that this importance is tied to the fact that we are the kind of creatures that we are. The kind of creatures, for instance, that *need* such things as care, fairness, friendship, justice, kindness, respect, and so on.[129] These values animate, as I argued in Chapter 3, the deep ethical concerns of ordinary moral agents. Thanks to emotions, one experiences the importance of a caring gesture, of loving words, of a generous action. One also experiences the importance of blatant injustice, frustrating indolence, harmful ignorance, negligence, treachery, and so on. And there are certainly many more fine-grained evaluative phenomena than we have evaluative concepts for. We need emotional experiences to take the full measure of situations instantiating these properties, and to understand the practices in which these properties find meaning. Experiencing the importance of these moral considerations is tied to our emotional nature, and we may very well wonder what would happen with moral practices were we not emotional beings.

[129] What Philippa Foot, in her discussion on human goodness, calls "natural necessities." Things, in other words, without which we do not get by (see Foot 2001).

5. Emotion phenomenology and normative character

In the previous section, I discussed the idea that emotional experience is necessary to gain understanding of the demands which an evaluative situation makes on us. Now I want to defend the claim that normative character is revealed through the particular phenomenology of emotional experience. Let us first consider an example. In the example 'Unfair play', it is through an experience of indignation that the demands of an unfair situation come to speak to the citizens' agency:

> Unfair play: On March 17th 1955, a riot exploded in Montreal. Angry citizens descended on the streets to protest against the suspension of star Montreal Canadians hockey player Maurice Richard. This riot made history and was a precursor to the Quiet Revolution.[130] Superficially, Richard's predicament had to do with sports etiquette. But the real problem was that he was being brutalized during hockey games and unfairly treated (given no protection from referees and other authorities) because of his ethnicity. Richard, like many more at the time, was a victim of racism because he was French Canadian. Richard had been facing these injustices for years, but one mistreatment, on March 13th 1955, forced Richard to brutally defend himself during an on-ice assault. Following this, he was suspended. Francophones became indignant and protested the unfair suspension. This wave of indignation surged following the blatant unfair punishment and carried through to the revolution that would change the societal hierarchy between English and French Canadians.

Indignation did not suddenly appear after years of injustice toward the French Canadian community. Victims (including Richard) were indignant, but unable to improve the situation on their own. Indignation spread once a serious offense reached the general public. I want to take away from this example that although the seriousness of the offense might have made the public aware of the injustice, it is through indignation that it became *their* problem. Their indignation was an experience of the demands that this injustice made on them: "Protest!" "Refuse!" "Defend!" Through this experience, citizens formed the belief that "I should protest," "I should defend my people." The question is: How does one experience demandingness through emotional experience?

We are looking for an attitude which displays a phenomenology of one being struck by something that demands that something be done. The key characteristics of normative experience, as we can recall from Section 1, are that it is striking, non-voluntary, and

[130] The Quiet Revolution names a period of rapid and consequent change in the Canadian province of Québec during the 1960s. It was a time of reform, through which conservative ideologies and traditional values were challenged. See "Quiet Revolution" in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Durocher 2015).

compelling. I believe that three aspects of emotion phenomenology support the claim that this normative character is revealed through emotional experience. Before I specify these three aspects, I first need to say that my argument relies on the assumption that emotions are *attitudes* in their own right. Considering emotions as attitudes asks us to move beyond the common tendency to analyze them in terms of other mental states: construal, judgment, perception, and so on.[131] This tendency is questionable considering the ubiquitous place of emotions in human experience. Shouldn't the unique character that emotions contribute to our experience of the world be acknowledged? Why should they be analyzed through other mental phenomena, thus being characterized by the particularities of said phenomena?[132] We not only hear, see, touch, taste, imagine, suppose, judge; we also, for lack of a better expression, *feel good and bad* about the world in a number of ways. Emotions are sui generis experiences. Again, if it is clear that beliefs differ from suppositions and desires; that they are different attitudes we can take toward the same content (a belief, a supposition, and a desire can be about the same state of affairs: I believe it will rain tomorrow. I suppose that it will rain tomorrow based on sky patterns. I desire that it will rain tomorrow for the sake of my flowerbed), then why not take emotions as attitudes in their own right? If I am *upset, sad* or *delighted* that it is raining, then am I not taking a very different attitude to the same content? Moreover, they are attitudes with a distinctly salient phenomenology, which would arguably be less so, for instance, for the phenomenology of beliefs and suppositions. The idea that emotions are attitudes in their own right also finds confirmation in common experience. We often take very different attitudes toward the same situation and these different attitudes drastically change the way we experience and answer a situation. In Unfair play, English Canadian Hockey officials, who punished Richard, were not indignant, but satisfied—they thought that he got what he deserved.[133] If that is correct, then

[131] Philosophers have analyzed emotions in terms of other mental attitudes like, for instance, construals (Roberts 2003, 69–83), value judgments (Nussbaum 2004; Solomon 1993), perceptions (Meinong 1917; De Sousa 1997; Döring 2007; Deonna 2006; Tappolet 2016).

[132] The popular view that emotions are akin to perceptions precisely faces the difficulty of maintaining coherence, while accounting for the phenomenology of emotions which differs from the phenomenology of perceptions in a number of ways. See Tappolet (2016, 28–31), for a discussion of how defenders of the Perceptual Theory can accommodate these differences.

[133] This is not to say that the attitude one takes toward a situation gives the situation the evaluative properties that it has. Only a form of radical subjectivism about values would claim this. Rather, their satisfaction was not appropriate to the situation which did not call for punishment. Their appreciation of the moral situation was importantly flawed because they answered it with satisfaction instead of indignation. The question regarding the conditions under which we can say that an evaluative property is exemplified is the topic of much philosophical debate. For an introductory survey of the different positions, see Deonna and Teroni (2012, Chapter 4).

emotions can be analyzed as *attitudes* in their own right, "attitudes that subjects can take towards a variety of different contents" (Deonna and Teroni 2014, 27).[134]

Assuming that emotions are distinct attitudes with a markedly salient phenomenology allows us to account for an experience that engages the subject with the world: an experience of the world as demanding something of one *and* of one answering these demands. This experience is, first, an experience of importance. An experience of importance is one where the emotional object manifests itself as that which demands the subject's attention—it takes priority over other objects. The first demand is then a demand for attention that mobilizes the subject toward the emotional object. One's indignation turns one's attention to the injustice and maintains it on the injustice. That emotions capture our attention, thus, is supported by the accounts of both Brady and Watzl, as we can recall from Section 3. The experience of importance is then rapidly followed by a complex interaction between a feeling of self-engagement and a feeling of action-readiness. Emotional experience engages one's whole self. It is necessary within a normative experience that one feels wholly self-engaged because this experience bridges theoretical ideas with the practical realm. That is, one not only experiences the world as demanding something, but one experiences oneself as wholly engaging with the demand. Together with this feeling of engagement, one experiences oneself as ready to act in some way that corresponds to the distinct demand made by the emotional object. One feels oneself, for instance, engaged by the unjust situation and ready to protest. One's experience of action-readiness will greatly vary from one emotional object to the next. The demands made by injustice, for instance, are different from what is admirable or from what is suffering. These three phenomenal aspects of emotional experience (importance, self-engagement, action-readiness) are not an arbitrary bundle of phenomenal character, but the intricate character of experiencing the world as calling on us to do certain things.

These three phenomenal qualities of emotional experience together make up the normative experience. As one experiences an emotion, all three aspects might not be easily, if at all, distinguishable. One just feels oneself becoming engaged and answering to the emotional object's demands. In Unfair play, the protesters experience the unjust character of the situation as feeling engaged to answer the demand to protest and defend their people. One might wonder whether importance captures the demand to act. We experience, one might say, many things as

[134] They consider and reject the Judgment approach (which I did not develop here) and the Perceptual approach. They argue that the Attitudinal Theory of emotions better meets three important constraints about emotional nature (see Section 2 above): accounting for their intentionality, phenomenology, and epistemology. On this discussion, see Deonna and Teroni 2012; 2014.

important, although they do not make demands on us. However, as the description of the experience I have just provided should support, the demanding character of a situation is tied to its importance—something is experienced as a demand because its importance gives it priority over other things. Hence, the three aspects of emotion phenomenology I have just emphasized confer on these experiences their fundamental role in our moral lives because they reveal this complex character. They are three constraints that an experience must meet in order to be an experience of moral reasons.[135] How plausible is this account of emotion phenomenology?

Support for the distinct emotion phenomenology I am suggesting here can be found within contemporary theory of emotion. Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni (2012; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2021), contemporary defenders[136] of the Attitudinal Theory of emotions, argue that emotions are distinctive *experiential evaluative attitudes* that consist in specific types of felt bodily stances directed toward objects. Importantly, as they argue, the bodily attitude is holistic: it is "a form, of a Gestalt […] the consciousness of a global attitude of the organism" (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 79). They caution us, that is, to move away from an atomistic view of bodily feelings, which would present, through the feeling of different body parts (pulse rate, sweaty palms, and so on), a rather curious engagement with the world. They suggest rather that "the bodily changes involved in emotions are felt by the subject as distinctive attitudes that are directed towards external objects […] [T]he subject feels herself taking a distinctive bodily attitude towards a certain object" (Deonna and Teroni 2014, 27). One's emotional experience is one of a global stance one takes toward the world and not an experience of one's pulse rate increasing or palms becoming sweaty; one's whole self takes a stance. Deonna and Teroni's account supports the constraint, as specified above, that one experiences a situation as wholly self-engaging through emotional experience.

Experiencing a situation as wholly self-engaging does not yet explain how emotions are evaluative attitudes. According to the Attitudinal Theory, emotions are forms of evaluations in virtue of one's awareness of one's body globally adopting a specific stance toward an object. Deonna and Teroni qualify this stance as a kind of felt action-readiness: one experiences one's body as "being ready or poised to act in some specific manner towards a given object or situation" (Deonna and Teroni 2014, 28). For instance, fear is an experience of danger insofar as it is an experience of one's body being prepared for avoidance; anger is an experience of

[135] The focus of this discussion is moral values (and other values that are morally relevant like, for instance, some forms of danger that ask one to be courageous). However, I see no reason why this discussion should not extend to the whole evaluative realm. I see no reason why emotions would not also reveal, for instance, prudential reasons or aesthetic reasons.

[136] Edouard Claparède (1928) is considered an early precursor of the attitudinal theory.

offensiveness insofar as it consists in an experience of one's body being prepared to retaliate.[137] Compassion is an experience of suffering insofar as it is an experience of one's body's readiness to provide support and seek to relieve that suffering. The evaluation takes place, that is, through this felt global bodily stance. Emotions are essentially evaluative experiences insofar as they are experiences of feeling one's body ready for an action specific to its object (see Deonna and Teroni 2012; 2015).[138] This aspect of emotional attitudes supports then the second constraint—a phenomenology of being ready to act in accordance with what the emotional object demands.

The Attitudinal Theory explains how one can experience an evaluative situation as engaging and preparing one to act—two of the three constraints I stated above. Nevertheless, whether a subject experiences herself as being poised for action does not mean that she has reasons to act. The Attitudinal Theory is not equipped, as it is, with an account of how we experience demands. This account does not argue that normative character is part of the emotional experience. I believe, however, that the Attitudinal Theory is only a small step away from accommodating normative character.

Recall that the phenomenology of demandingness is accommodated through emotional experience thanks to the intricate interaction of the three phenomenal constraints I have specified: importance, self-engagement, action-readiness. The Attitudinal Theory accommodates two out of three constraints (self-engagement, action-readiness). Can we coherently rally the third constraint to expand their account? I believe we can, by relying on some of the material which Deonna and Teroni themselves use to support their account. They rely on ideas of psychologist Nico Frijda to argue that evaluative attitudes are felt action-readiness. Frijda's description of action-readiness should starkly illustrate how this experience contributes "essentially to the world being presented to the subject as significant for her in various ways" (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 80). I will discuss Frijda's account below. But before doing so, note that Deonna and Teroni present a *subject-based* account of emotional experience. It is an account centered around the subject's experience of being poised to act.

[137] If we accept this account of action-readiness, a further step would be to formulate very specific descriptions of the kind of preparedness the body undergoes. Being prepared for avoidance is one example which characterizes fear; however, other cases of fear might require more fine-grained descriptions, some of which are not avoidance. We need only think of the fear one feels sitting by the hospital bed of a loved one dying of cancer. The phenomenology of the fear of loss or suffering does not seem to be best described as an experience of being prepared for avoidance. It is perhaps better captured in terms of feeling cessation of movement or paralysis or again feeling ready to fight the threat; fighting, alongside a loved one, against the sickness.

[138] And note here an important point. That they do not claim that the emotions are directed toward the subject's own body, which would have the undesired implication that emotions can only acquaint us with our own body. Here emotions are a distinct type of bodily attitudes directed outside the subject's own body; directed toward the world.

Although this accounts for the subject's relation to the world, their account minimizes the role of the emotional object (the role of the world, so to speak) in determining the character of the emotional experience. I believe that we will be able to meet the third constraint—the experience of importance—if we move away from a subject-based account of the phenomenology of action-readiness and toward an *object-based* account of this phenomenology.

While accepting key intuitions of the Attitudinal Theory, Jonathan Mitchell argues for an object-based account of the phenomenology of action-readiness.[139] According to Mitchell, the demanding character of emotional experiences is to be found within this object-based account. Mitchell also relies on Frijda's account for his argument. Let us then consider some of Frijda's key lines:

> Action readiness transforms a neutral world into one with places of danger and openings towards safety, in fear, with targets for kissing and their being accessible for it, in enamoration, with roads stretching out endlessly before one, in fatigue, misery, and despair, with insistent calls for entry or participation or consumption, in enjoyment. (Frijda 2007, 205)

Mitchell underlines that Frijda not only emphasizes that action-readiness is an ubiquitous feature of emotional experience, but that he presses us to recognize that action-readiness is an experience of the world outside one: "the experience is about something. [That is,] if attention is fully focused on the world, emotion experience is out there. The meanings are out there, phenomenally" (Frijda 2007, 203–4). What is phenomenally *out there* is the world in the form of emotional objects demanding something of one. An emotional experience is an experience of what "the event is inciting, ordering, and guiding one to do" (Frijda 2007, 204). As Frijda further writes: "action readiness is reflected in the objects' and places' demand characters of 'to be removed,' 'to be distanced from,' or 'to be united with'" (Frijda 2007, 205). If we follow Frijda, the character of action-readiness paradigmatic of emotional experience first "concerns the particular objects of those experiences," as opposed to, that is, the attitude taken by the subject. Thus, as Mitchell presses: "those particular objects possess demand characters and these demands are not 'mere possibilities for action,' but are 'imperatives to action'" (Mitchell

[139] Mitchell, who I take to be a follower of the Attitudinal Theory, raises objections toward the bodily phenomenology central to the Deonna and Teroni account. He suggests bypassing the bodily aspect and casting emotion phenomenology directly as phenomenology of action-readiness. I will not discuss this difference here because it seems to me that Mitchell underestimates the place which a phenomenology of action-readiness already holds in Deonna and Teroni's account: they argue, after all, that emotional experience is an experience of one's body being ready to act—they are not advertising for just any bodily phenomenology.

2021, 2655–56). This is how the subject experiences emotional objects as demands for actions and why emotional objects first manifest themselves as importance in the subject's experience.

According to Frijda and Mitchell, the subject-based phenomenology (the moment when the subject experiences herself as bodily engaged and ready to act) figures as a second-order awareness of emotional experience—a reflexive experience. This would suggest that the object-based phenomenology is primary in experience. I would like to question the phenomenological accuracy of this second-order subject-based phenomenology. It does not seem correct to say, for instance, that we first feel indignation and then think of ourselves as feeling engaged and ready to act. A more accurate phenomenological description might be, rather, that of an organic flow between the object's demanding character and how our whole self is engaged as a response to the demand: a flow from object-based to subject-based experience. An experience of injustice (one's fellow citizen being treated unfairly) is a complex and at the same time fluid experience: a situation suddenly takes on an urgent character; it asks for one's attention; it makes certain demands on one; one feels one's whole self engaging, such that one finds oneself ready to respond to these demands—ready to act. There is an interplay between the object-subject phenomenology: one experiences the world as asking something of one; one feels wholly engaged; one feels ready to act in relation to the demands of the emotional object. The experience flows from object-to-subject-to-object. Coming back to this chapter's guiding question, we can now say that it is within the flow from object-based to subject-based experience that reasons become one's own. It is this complex experience that gives rise to a normative experience. Hence, with the help of Frijda and Mitchell's accounts, we have rallied the third constraint: emotional experience has a demanding character which the subject experiences first in terms of importance.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide an account of the kind of experience that can reveal normative character. This experience is necessary to appreciate moral reasons, that is, to make moral reasons one's own through the formation of a self-engaging belief. I argued that correct emotional experiences reveal normative character. Through a correct emotional experience, one experiences the emotional object as asking something of one, one feels wholly engaged, one feels ready to act in relation to the demands of the emotional object. The emotional experience, moreover, has a demanding character which the subject experiences first in terms of importance.

To defend this account of normative experience, I first considered the view that normative character is presented through an experience of prescriptive affordances. Although I argued that we have reasons not to accept this account, we could still extract from this discussion three key characteristics of normative experiences: they are striking, non-voluntary, and compelling. I suggested that we take seriously the idea that emotional experiences can reveal normative character given that they can accommodate these three characteristics. To defend the account of normative experiences as emotional experiences, I then presented emotions and their intimate relation to values. It is because emotions are evaluative experiences that they reveal the demanding character of evaluative properties, including ethical evaluative properties. I cautioned, moreover, that not all emotional experiences reveal demanding character, but correct ones do: emotional experience in the presence of its formal object. I then introduced the view that emotions facilitate evaluative judgments by capturing and consuming our attention. This view provides reasons to believe that emotions play a role in driving an agent's epistemic engagement and thus grants emotions a first role within my framework. Some of the limitations of the view encourage us not to remain content with the instrumental role it confers on emotion. Something about emotional experience is necessary, as I then argued in Section 4, to gain understanding of what a moral situation demands of one. I then argued, in Section 5, that there are three phenomenal constraints that emotions should meet to reveal normative character: importance, self-engagement, and action-readiness. I finally argued that emotional experience can accommodate these three constraints, by harnessing resources from the Attitudinal Theory of emotion, together with that of psychologist Nico Frijda's account of emotion. Thus, I defended the claim that emotional experience is first that of the emotional object's demanding character, then that of a subject experiencing herself as ready to act in relation with these demands. Only by qualifying the emotional experience as this flow from the object's demanding character to the experience of one's whole self engaging as a response to the demand, can we account for the normative qualities of these experiences.

This discussion now clarifies and supports the claims I defended in Chapter 2 about the need to develop a relation of appreciation with moral reasons. In addition, the necessity of emotional experience, if one is to access normative character, provides further support for the pessimists' claim, which we can recall from Chapter 1, that there is something which moral agents need to be able to do on their own. While a person informed through testimony that there is a reason to Φ (e.g. a reason not to eat meat, a reason to protest, a reason to help a colleague, etc.) can form a justified normative belief, she is not guaranteed, through the

testimonial exchange, to form a belief about what she should do. Moral agents need emotional experiences to recognize that moral considerations give *them* a reason to act and form the corresponding beliefs. The epistemic achievement is that of forming the right beliefs about the normative situation in which one finds oneself: forming a belief about what one should do.

Concluding remarks

The goal of this dissertation was twofold. It was, first, to shed light on a puzzle of moral agency —the puzzle that active, confident, and well-intentioned moral agents are often led astray in their actions, in ways of which they are unaware. Mr. Thomas Gradgrind—who loves his daughter and wants the best for her, but restrained her into a monotonous and deadening education—is an example of this puzzling agential reality. Other examples, I suggested, are to be found in ordinary patterns that support structures of social discrimination—Judge S., who we can recall from Chapter 4, and whose prejudices corrupt her evaluation of Rita's court case, is an example. The second goal of this dissertation was to provide an account of moral understanding that sheds light on common intuitions regarding this puzzle. We have the intuition that Gradgrind, despite his good intentions and confidence, lacks a core element akin to moral understanding. We take ethical successes to be intimately tied to one's good moral understanding, and one's lack thereof to importantly impinge on one's actions.

I argued for an account of moral understanding as the competence to navigate ethical life. One who has good moral understanding can successfully find her way around complex ethical terrain to figure out what one should do. This navigation is specifically moral in that it is conducted by people whose desire to live well fosters deep ethical concerns. Failed moral agents, as they do not desire to live well, are not engaged within this navigation. Their lack of moral understanding can generally not be rescued. In contrast, ordinary moral agents face shortages of moral understanding—their ordinary ethical navigation fails—in moments when lack of epistemic engagement prevents them from being in contact with moral considerations. In such cases, they cannot appreciate moral reasons—they are not in a position to form a self-engaging belief about what they should do. Equipped with this account of moral understanding, I could thus circle back to the puzzle I raised about moral agency. The puzzling shortcomings we commonly find in well-intentioned moral agents are ones of navigation. They are puzzling in as much as we take ordinary moral agents to be able to do better—be more competent—in light of their own concerns. We take them to be capable of finding their way.

An account of moral understanding as a competence to navigate is warranted, I have argued, because it accommodates fundamental shared intuitions about the nature of this epistemic good. As I argued in Chapter 1, moral understanding is a moral competence that should not be outsourced because it is part of the integrity of being a moral agent, to develop and exercise it. Yet it can, and often should, be supported by other members of the moral

community. It is an epistemic competence in as much as it confers one with the ability to form the right moral beliefs and to gain moral knowledge. It is tempting to cast this competence either as a capacity to gain moral knowledge or as forming a set of abilities to provide moral explanations. The former capacity, because it can be outsourced, is not suitable, as I argued. The latter set of abilities, while they can bolster one's moral epistemic competence, are neither sufficient nor necessary for one to have a systematic grasp of morality and to figure out what one should do—two characteristics an account of moral understanding cannot do without. The competence to navigate ethical life, on the other hand, accommodates all these elements: it relies on abilities that cannot be outsourced, these abilities imply a systematic grasp of morality to function, and the metric of success related to this competence is that of being able to figure out what one should do.

In developing this account, I ran into a number of limitations. Amongst those is the fact that the idea of ethical navigation would benefit from further analysis and more in depth characterization. The idea of navigation is helpful as a metaphor to construe moral agency as evolving and shaping itself within a 'terrain', but it is also literally an epistemic activity that engages one with the world, and whose nature, when applied to the ethical realm, should be better understood. Some might, moreover, wonder why the account defended here only applies to moral questions—the asymmetry discussed in Chapter 1. Are only moral beliefs to be formed based on the exercise of one's own epistemic abilities and wits? Can one reasonably defer to trustworthy others for all other concerns of one's life? In what way is one not outsourcing agency *tout court* in such cases of deference? We might formulate two different answers to these questions. On the one hand, outsourcing one's agency to others in non-moral cases is something we take as uncontroversial in many domains of our lives. The deference we give to medical doctors, not only about particular health information, but about what we should do to maintain good health is one example. Similarly, we trust our life concerns and safety to experts in a number of fields, from accounting, to bungy jumping, to travel by flight. As such, it seems that there are a number of decisions that can be and are incontestably outsourced to expert others. On the other hand, as I have noted above, the realm of values extends beyond ethical values. We might thus conclude that appreciating the demands given by other values—aesthetic, epistemic, prudential—also requires that we have our own normative experience and rely on this experience to form our practical beliefs – practices which, if absent, lead to the loss of a subject's integrity and sense of self.

The account of moral understanding defended here further supports the view, gaining popularity in the relevant literature, that this moral epistemic good is not – cannot – be only an

intellectual feat—if "intellectual" is taken in the traditional sense. The account, while it harnesses and praises cognitive faculties, they are not the traditional ones of calculating, deliberating, and reasoning, but those of doubting, exploring, questioning, imagining, inquiring, waiting and, crucially, those of attending and feeling. A further upshot of this discussion is a novel understanding of two Murdochian notions, embedded within a general framework of ordinary moral epistemic competence. I have thus argued in this dissertation for a certain view of moral agency. A moral agent is a humble explorer of her world, dedicated to navigating complex and non-codifiable ethical terrain. I take this profile to follow from questions regarding access to moral facts and questions regarding the requisite abilities to form true beliefs and gain moral knowledge. The epistemic challenges, in other words, brought about by the nature of moral properties and the nature of our selves and of our experience of the world support a certain view of competent moral agency—an agency that I have dubbed *ordinary*. The view that moral agents are humble explorers of ordinary life is defended by many feminist ethicists, to who I am most indebted. This tradition emphasizes the ordinariness and situatedness of moral agents—the fact that the starting point of ethical reflection is within existing moral practices. As Marty Kheel writes, the question is not how to "offer abstract principles and constructs to control [inevitable egotistic impulses], rather, how and why compassion and moral conduct […] have failed to be sustained" (2008, 209). Acknowledging the legitimacy of this framework involves accepting a fundamental risk—the risk that navigating ethical reality is not straightforward, the way often hard to find, the path often unclear, the uncertainty sometimes reaching peak measures. As such, a humble moral agent is one who is able to say, even if frightened: "I do not know what I should do". That is one key moment, to use the formulation I introduced in Chapter 4, when one has to "sit with the problem". To accept this risk, one has to revisit one's assumptions about human nature—betting, like feminist ethicist, on the caring, compassionate, loving and trusting propensities of our nature, and seeing egotistic, arrogant and neglectful actions as a puzzle to be solved and not the norm to be worked around. The starting point for thinking about moral conduct should be, in other words, community and cooperation, and the puzzles that of egoism, competition and conflict—not the other way around.

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