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Epistemic Authorities and Skilled Agents: A Pluralist Account of Moral Expertise

Federico Bina¹ · Sofia Bonicalzi^{2,3} · Michel Croce¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of moral expertise in the contemporary philosophical debate, with a focus on three accounts discussed across moral epistemology, bioethics, and virtue ethics: an epistemic authority account, a skilled agent account, and a hybrid model sharing key features of the two. It is argued that there are no convincing reasons to defend a monistic approach that reduces moral expertise to only one of these models. A pluralist view is outlined in the attempt to reorient the discussion about moral expertise.

Keywords Moral expertise · Moral epistemology · Virtue ethics · Moral knowledge · Moral understanding · Moral exemplars

1 Introduction

The past decade has seen an upsurge of philosophical interest in the topic of expertise. Whether or not one believes that philosophical discussion around expertise has made significant progress, the more specific topic of experts in the *moral* or *ethical* domain is somewhat stuck on traditional problems.¹ Some scholars worry that, differently from other fields, there is nothing to be known in the moral domain (Agich and Spielman 1997; Mackie 1977); others argue that nobody is better positioned than anyone else to know whatever is there to be known (Reid 1788); others contend that while there might be experts about morality, ordinary folks are unable to identify them as moral truths are exoteric to them (LaBarge 2005).

Even amongst the optimists about moral expertise, it's unclear what would make one a moral expert. In this paper, we focus on two paradigmatic ways of conceiving moral experts in the philosophical debate: (i) as epistemic authorities, i.e., people who are in a better epistemic position and

provide better guidance on moral matters than most people in a community; and (ii) as skilled agents, i.e., people who behave morally better than most others. According to the former conception, moral expertise is a matter of possessing better knowledge or understanding of moral issues. The best candidates for this conception of moral experts are moral philosophers and ethics consultants, who can help others acquire an informed view in morally complex situations. According to the latter view, moral expertise is concerned with acting well and, more broadly, living a good life. Accordingly, for several scholars moral competence should be conceived of as a practical skill rather than epistemic superiority. In a word, moral experts are not sophisticated analysts or consultants but virtuous or wise agents; that is, people who consistently act—and not only judge—morally well and better than average.

These conceptions lie at the grounds of two debates about moral expertise, mostly taking place in moral epistemology and bioethics, on the one hand, and in virtue ethics, on the other. The paper investigates these accounts in an attempt to assess the relationship between their notions of a moral expert; that is, whether they overlap and even mutually implicate each other, or rather depict two alternative models of moral expertise. The thesis we shall defend is that there is no reason to reduce the notion of a moral expert to either model to the detriment of the other, and that *hybrid*

✉ Federico Bina
federicobina7@gmail.com

¹ University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy

² Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy

³ Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany

¹ In the remainder of this paper, we use the terms 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably.

approaches combining key features of the other two models provide an unduly restrictive account of moral expertise. Based on functionalist considerations about the role that each kind of moral expert is supposed to fulfill in their community, we will argue that epistemic authorities about the moral domain and virtuous individuals can be very different kinds of agents, who may display one kind of moral competence while lacking the other. On these grounds, we will then endorse a *pluralist* view that makes room for the kinds of moral experts outlined by both models.² The scope of the paper is also methodological. By shedding light on the current shape of the debate about moral expertise, we aim to clarify the terms of the dispute and possibly reorient the discussion to overcome alleged disagreements on what it takes to be a moral expert. The overall ambition is that this effort will promote and ameliorate exchanges between different perspectives on the topic of moral expertise.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the topic of moral expertise by clarifying how this notion differs from expertise in other fields, and why this seems to make the former more controversial and philosophically problematic than the latter. Section 2 discusses two versions of the *epistemic authority* account of moral experts that provide an *intellectualist*, highly theoretical, notion of moral expertise. It will be argued that, while they offer a clear definition of a moral expert that does not presuppose the truth of a particular moral theory, they restrict moral expertise to the possession of philosophical competence. Section 3 discusses the *skilled agent* account of moral experts, a markedly *anti-intellectualist* view according to which moral expertise mostly requires knowing-how and need not necessarily involve the ability to account for one's decisions. It will be argued that, while this approach makes sense of the idea that moral experts need to be reliable performers in the moral domain—that is, virtuous agents—it struggles to overcome culturally relative or outdated models of moral excellence and handle disagreement and dialogue between reasonably different moral views. After showing the limits of both models, in Sect. 4 we consider a *hybrid* account that combines features of the former positions, taking moral experts to be virtuous agents while including stronger intellectualist conditions. It will be argued that while this third approach could in principle avoid some problems affecting the virtuous agent account, it sets too strict requirements for one to be a moral expert. The proposed analysis motivates the rejection of any attempt to reduce the notion of a moral

expert either to epistemic authorities or to virtuous agents. Both the original accounts capture key aspects that allow some agents to become highly more competent than others, albeit in different morally relevant situations. This justifies endorsing a pluralist view of moral expertise.

2 Knowledge, Skills, and Moral Expertise

Since at least Plato's dialogues,³ one of the central questions in the philosophy of expertise is whether being an expert amounts to possessing practical knowledge (*techne*) or theoretical knowledge (*episteme*; e.g., Watson 2020). The relationship between these two kinds of knowledge—in particular, whether knowing-how involves knowing-that—still is a hotly contested issue in the contemporary discussion (Fantl 2008) and has had an impact on the debate about expertise. On the one hand, *epistemic* accounts characterize expertise in terms of one's epistemic superiority over most members of a community (e.g., Coady 2012; Fricker 2006; Grundmann forthcoming). On the other hand, *performance-based* accounts conceive expertise as proficiency in practical activities that require training and exercise, and need not always involve—let alone be grounded in—explicit theoretical knowledge (e.g., Collins and Evans 2007; Ericsson and Pool 2016; Grundmann 2023).

Yet, while these approaches provide somewhat different characterizations of what it takes for one to be an expert,⁴ it is widely agreed that expertise often requires possessing knowledge-that as well as knowledge-how (Goldman 1991: 129–130; Goldman 2018; Croce 2019). Most cases of expertise we can think of involve both theoretical and practical competencies, albeit in various degrees. Historians, for example, ought to know a lot about a specific subject matter but also have a wide set of skills necessary to conduct research, convey information to various kinds of audiences, etc. Similarly, while aircraft pilots get a license based on the experience they acquire after many flight hours, flying an aircraft also requires background theoretical knowledge of aerodynamics, aircraft systems, regulations of airspace and navigation, and weather patterns.

As will become clear in the next sections, these general issues about expertise carry over to the debate on moral expertise. However, as anticipated above, the notion of moral expertise is even more contentious for reasons pertaining to the specifics of the ethical domain. For starters, radical criticisms of the idea of moral expertise arise out of skeptical considerations about the existence of objective

² Note that the account we shall argue for aims to provide a characterization of the constitutive features of what a moral expert consists in, rather than to address the epistemic question of what markers one should look for when distinguishing between experts and non-experts (Cholbi 2007). For another defense of a pluralist approach, see Driver (2013).

³ See, e.g., *Gorgias*, *Meno*, and *Statesman*.

⁴ See Watson (2020) for an overview of these and other approaches to the topic of expertise.

moral truths or facts. Arguably, it is far from obvious that there is anything to be expert about in the domain of morality because it is highly disputed whether moral assertions have truth value (Gibbard 1990; Schroeder 2010). In this paper, we shall remain agnostic about the existence of mind-independent moral facts and whether moral statements can be true or false in any substantial sense. The more modest but still fundamental point on which we shall concentrate our discussion is whether one can identify—or come to an agreement on—at least intersubjectively justified criteria for determining who should be trusted and who performs better in the domain of morality (Crosthwaite 1995; Weinstein 1993; 1994; Yoder 1998). There is indeed considerable disagreement on what the appropriate standards of competence and moral correctness are, as well as on the possibility of defining any such standards at all. Ethics differs from other domains regarding how to measure success: we cannot simply assess expertise in the moral domain by measuring an expert's reliability in achieving their ends in the domain because in ethics, unlike most other domains, the ends of acting morally are a controversial matter (McGrath 2008). When it comes to figuring out who gets things right or acts correctly in complicated moral situations, there is often no set of fixed ends or standards one can assume to be the correct guide (Hursthouse 1999, p. 56; Swartwood 2020, pp. 79–81, 90).

A second source of skepticism about moral expertise is that while we often seem to have a clear sense of who is an expert in, say, history, medicine, or architecture, when it comes to moral expertise people seem to have very different figures in mind. To mention just some, gurus, elderly people, priests, philosophers, charismatic leaders, and shamans have historically been treated as moral experts at different times in the modern history of our cultures. The problem lies in the fact that the standard markers we deploy to individuate an expert in other domains—such as track record, formal qualifications, reputation, and consensus within the expert community⁵—do not work well in the case of moral experts because they presuppose widespread agreement on how to measure their reliability. Since, as we have just mentioned, disagreement about this topic is a common and often serious issue, some hold that identifying moral experts could well be an insurmountable problem (Cholbi 2007).

Despite these skeptical considerations, a more optimistic view on the issue emerges from a recent study involving more than four thousand philosophers from almost one hundred countries, who have been asked about their views on moral expertise (Niv and Sulizeanu-Kenan 2022: p. 933). According to the results of this survey, a vast majority of the respondents report believing in moral expertise, even though

they disagree about what a moral expert is. Interestingly, almost 40% of the respondents believe that philosophers possess superior analytical skills as regards moral matters, while almost 50% believe that they possess both superior analytical skills and better knowledge of what is morally right to do on particular occasions.

Given the scenario we have just sketched, the reader might legitimately wonder how extant accounts on the market define moral experts if it is not so clear what expertise in the ethical domain amounts to. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss three possible answers to this question.

3 The Epistemic Authority Account

Consider the *epistemic authority* account of moral expertise first. This view understands the notion of an expert as someone who is epistemically superior to most people regarding the moral domain and is interested in explaining how they can help other community members improve their epistemic position about ethical matters. Since, as we have just mentioned, the idea that there may be people endowed with greater epistemic authority in the moral domain is controversial, proponents of this approach address the problem typically by making one of the following moves. Some remain neutral about the possibility of truth-apt moral judgments and the existence of moral experts, and hence engage with the topic in the form of a conditional analysis: if there are moral experts, they will have such and such features (Cholbi 2007: p. 334). Others lower the expectations of any attempt to define moral expertise and accept that, since assessing which moral theory is true is an extremely controversial endeavor, moral experts' "role would be limited to pointing out morally relevant considerations, which the autonomous judge would then accept or reject for herself. But the worry does seem incompatible with a more robust moral expert—a person whose superior moral acuity gives her greater authority in moral judgment" (Driver 2006: p. 624; see also Yoder 1998).

In this paper, we shall concentrate on the latter approach to the epistemic authority model, a notable version of which has been proposed by Singer (1972) and Singer and Wells (1984). In their view, a moral expert is "someone familiar with moral concepts and with moral arguments, who has ample time to gather information and think about it, may reasonably be expected to reach a soundly based conclusion more often than someone who is unfamiliar with moral concepts and moral arguments and has little time" (117). More specifically, in this model, a person S is a moral expert insofar as S has:

⁵ See, e.g., Baghramian and Croce 2021, Grundmann forthcoming.

- (1) An understanding of the nature of ethics and the meanings of moral concepts as well as a good knowledge of the main ethical theories;
- (2) The ability to formulate sound and good moral arguments, avoid mistakes in moral reasoning, and recognize logical fallacies and mistakes in others' moral arguments;
- (3) Appropriate information about the matters on which S is asked to give S's opinion.

It comes as no surprise that, given these conditions, moral philosophers amount to the paradigmatic candidates as moral experts. While Singer and Wells (1984: p. 201) envisage democratic communities attempting to broaden the ethical expertise of their members, in general, moral philosophers meet (1) by virtue of what they have learnt about moral philosophy during their studies, and (2) by virtue of the abilities they have developed through philosophical training. Furthermore, given the time they devote to reflecting on moral problems and the experience they have acquired in analyzing all the relevant aspects of a quandary, arguably they are better positioned than anyone else to reach—or, at least, approximate—justified moral conclusions. As for (3), we cannot expect moral philosophers to be knowledgeable about every moral issue that might arise within a community. Far from being a serious obstacle, this simply requires that they get acquainted with the specifics of the issue at stake when asked to give their opinion, as anyone else would have to do in a similar situation.

In a similar—albeit more detailed—fashion, Schaefer and Savulescu (2019) recently provided a 'Neo-Rawlsian' procedural framework including six capacities that one must possess to be a reliable moral judge. These capacities are:

- *Logical competence*, i.e. moral judgments should be mutually coherent: this means making correct logical inferences, spotting inconsistencies in one's and others' judgments, identifying the implications of one's beliefs and the matter of contention between interlocutors;⁶
- *Conceptual understanding*, i.e., an understanding of the content and scope of application of moral concepts and ideas, and the ability to communicate it effectively (77);

⁶ "One might hold, for instance, the following three views: all corrupt politicians should be punished no matter how mild the corruption; one's favourite politician is mildly corrupt; and one's favourite politician should not be punished for so mild a corruption, given all the good work she is doing. These are jointly inconsistent, as the first two views imply by modus ponens that one's favourite politician should be punished even for mild corruption. Something has to give—logically, one of the views must be given up" (ibid., 76; on this point, see also Brink 1989; Campbell & Kumar 2012; 2013).

- *Empirical competence*, i.e., knowledge of non-moral, empirical facts;⁷
- Openness to the revision of one's opinions;
- *Empathic understanding*, i.e., understanding of others' situation and point of view (79);
- *Bias avoidance*, i.e., "taking factors into account in a moral judgment that are not relevant to that moral judgment".⁸

Despite some terminological differences between "moral experts" and "reliable moral judges", and a more in-depth characterization of their required features, Schaefer & Savulescu agree with Singer & Wells on the core idea of the account. In their own words: "we do not think that philosophers are, in virtue of their training, better people than the rest of the population. However, we do have some confidence that philosophical approaches to moral problems are at least somewhat reliable at coming to correct moral judgments" (83).

Procedural accounts have several advantages over more substantial views according to which either moral experts are people who possess better moral knowledge and/or reliably point out the right thing to do in complex scenarios (Rasmussen 2011; Vogelstein 2015), or behave better than others relatively to an objectively correct moral standard. We will delve further into the latter point in the next section. Regarding the former, the idea that moral experts are epistemic authorities in the domain of objective mind-independent moral truths who can recommend the correct solution to complex and controversial problems—rather than pointing out the best methods to address such problems—is problematic. Such a strong, substantive notion of epistemic authority in the moral domain appears closer to that of religious leaders, prophets, or gurus, (self-)proclaimed holders of absolute moral truths whose foundation is typically traced back to some scripture, the word of a deity, or an eternal order of things. Paradigmatic examples include extremist religious positions on bioethical issues such as abortion or end-of-life matters, based on the absolutist moral idea that life is a good to be protected at any cost.

⁷ Consider this argument proposed as an example by Schaefer and Savulescu:

"P1: Senator Barney accepts bribes.

P2: Anyone accepting bribes should be punished.

C: Senator Barney should be punished.

P2 and the conclusion are moral claims, and so without further elaboration are untouched by empirical concerns. However, P1 is an empirical, non-moral claim. The moral conclusion only follows if it is correct" (77).

⁸ E.g. "how you frame a question should not matter to one's opinion of it; one should not hold oneself to different moral standards as that of others; one should not privilege one's relations over others in the public sphere; and so on" (81).

First, procedural accounts enable one to hold a pluralist stance “thus avoiding many question-begging moral assumptions” (Schaefer and Savulescu 2019, p. 75). Several moral disputes are, in fact, so controversial that it is problematic to believe that one principle or specific solution is the true or correct one, on which everyone must converge. Second, procedural accounts—especially those that are concerned primarily with how people justify their behaviors, decisions, judgments, and beliefs—are more suited to discriminate between cases in which agents reach a given moral conclusion arbitrarily or unreflectively, and cases in which they do so because of a clearer understanding of a situation. As such, a procedural account like Schaefer and Savulescu’s appears well-suited to address the problem of how to recognize moral experts on the basis of reliable markers: moral experts are those who more often, and better than others, meet relatively uncontroversial epistemic requirements such as the ones they suggest. So conceived, procedural frameworks of moral expertise appear quite easy to operationalize for the identification of the most reliable moral judges in specific contexts, as well as for the implementation and assessment of training projects aimed at improving peoples’ moral decision-making abilities.

However, these advantages of procedural accounts come at the price of departing from the standard understanding of expertise in epistemological discussion as regards both (a) the grounds of experts’ epistemic superiority and (b) the function of moral experts in their community.

As for (a), if procedural accounts do not commit to the claim that moral agents can reach objective moral knowledge, then they cannot explain the nature of the epistemic superiority of moral experts by appealing to standard epistemic goods such as knowledge and understanding, in that these notions are typically intended to be factive states (e.g., Kvanvig 2003). Singer and Wells do not address the issue in detail, but they refer to such things as “understanding moral concepts and theories” and “grasping relevant facts” as fundamental skills for reaching “more soundly based ethical conclusions” (1984: p. 200–201). Instead, Schaefer & Savulescu explicitly admit that their notion of a reliable moral judge falls short of the constraints on the reliability necessary to possess knowledge (2019: p. 74).

These remarks suggest—albeit less explicitly than one would hope—that, according to proponents of the epistemic authority account, the epistemic superiority of moral experts has to be intended in terms of non-factive moral understanding (see, e.g., de Regt 2015; Elgin 2017; Severini 2021; Zagzebski 2001). In general, understanding can be intended as encompassing an informational component and a grasping component (Boyd 2017). The informational component amounts to possessing the pieces of information necessary to understand a subject matter or a problem *x*. The grasping component can be intended as an intellectual know-how, in

that it involves the exercise of intellectual skills required to connect the relevant pieces of information, follow explanations involving them, and deploy such information when needed in different contexts.⁹ On a non-factive account, understanding a theory *T* (or why *p* is the case) does not depend on *T* (or *p*) being true. One can have a high degree of understanding of a moral theory (or of the reasons in favor of a particular moral conduct) even if that theory turned out to be false (or that conduct turned out to be wrong). A non-factive account of understanding fits well with the epistemic authority model precisely because, as we have just seen, this view purports to remain neutral about substantive disputes among normative ethical theories.

As for (b), according to procedural versions of the epistemic authority account, moral experts fulfill a narrower function in their community than experts in most domains. It is standard to think that the role of experts involves helping laypeople solve problems within the experts’ domain of competence (Goldman 2001; Croce 2019). In general, experts offer advice via testimony in the form of transmission of evidence, knowledge, or understanding depending on the layperson’s epistemic needs.¹⁰ If we want to go to the best spots for snorkeling in Thailand, we might well follow a local guide’s advice about which islands have more diverse marine life and intact reefs. Yet, when it comes to ethical matters, there seems to be something “fishy” (Enoch 2014; Howell 2014) in acting on an expert’s say-so. If we have to decide whether to keep eating meat, acting only on a moral philosopher’s testimony seems not good enough (Hopkins 2007). Good moral decisions require that one chooses the right option for the reasons that make it right; but the mere fact that a philosopher told us that eating meat is morally wrong is not a right-making reason (Hills 2009; McGrath 2009; Boyd 2020). Appealing to the philosopher’s testimony does not provide us with a good explanation for why we avoid ordering a ham and cheese panini.

What we need to ‘own’ our moral decisions is precisely moral understanding,¹¹ but several epistemologists contend that we cannot acquire it via testimony (e.g., Gordon 2017; Hills 2009; Zagzebski 2001).¹² This is because the kind of grasping required by understanding is a matter of exerting intellectual skills, and testimony conveys propositional content but not abilities. Here lies the idea that the function of

⁹ The grasping model of understanding has been proposed by Hills (2009; 2016) and discussed in, e.g., Boyd (2017), Sliwa (2017). Note, though, that in Hills’ and most commentators’ view, understanding is a factive notion.

¹⁰ For an in-depth, and in part competing, analysis of advising and moral advice see Wiland (2021).

¹¹ See Markovits (2010) for an alternative view.

¹² For contrasting views, see Boyd (2017), Croce (2020), Malfatti (2019).

moral experts is narrower than the one we typically ascribe to experts in other domains. According to the epistemic authority account, moral experts guide us to the extent that they do not only provide reliable judgment (p) but also the reasons (q) supporting that judgment (Cholbi 2007; Hills 2016; Yoder 1998).¹³ By offering a considerate assessment of the available options, they allow us to fulfill the informational component of understanding. Deciding what to do in these fields remains up to us and the likelihood of making a justified decision also depends on how much we grasp the expert's advice—which amounts to fulfilling the grasping component of understanding. It's no coincidence that, besides highlighting the required training in moral philosophy, epistemic authority accounts consider ethics consultants in hospitals and other professional settings as paradigmatic instances of moral experts, for the role of these figures typically involves supporting their interlocutors in making considerate decisions in complex situations.

So far, we have been discussing two ways in which the epistemic authority account departs from the epistemological orthodoxy as regards defining experts. In general, the problems we have identified suggest the need for more dialogue between epistemologists and moral theorists on these matters. But we attempted to show that, despite some complexities, this account seems able to accommodate both kinds of dissonance and retain a way of making sense of experts' service qua advisors for lay members of the community on moral matters. Nonetheless, even setting aside the above epistemological considerations, the epistemic authority model appears to incur additional criticisms, particularly as regards its characterization of a moral expert as a person who ought to possess specialized training in logic and ethics.

On the one hand, various studies suggest that it is not clear that moral philosophers are better than others at reasoning about moral issues. For example, recent experimental studies by Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012; 2015) show that moral philosophers are just as susceptible to biases (such as framing effects) as non-moral philosophers are in the evaluation of moral problems and in coherent applications of moral principles. On the other hand, the epistemic authority account overlooks the dimension of the moral expert's motivation. According to Cholbi (2007), this is problematic because, other things being equal, we would not trust an expert who seems unmoved by their own advice.¹⁴ This is another respect in which moral competence differs

from other kinds of expertise: indifference and incoherence hinder moral competence, while they appear relatively less problematic in other domains.¹⁵

We believe that the former objection makes a compelling point against the epistemic authority account, whereas proponents of this view can resist the motivation challenge. Admitting that some individuals may be better at reasoning about moral problems and justifying their responses (regardless of the percentage of moral philosophers within this group) does not entail that these people reliably behave better than others too. First, there does not seem to be a necessary connection in this sense between judgment and action, unless one accepts a form of strong motivational internalism that appears, in these terms, frankly indefensible. Second, the domain of judgment-advice and the domain of action appear to be somewhat separate. Expertise in the former has to do with careful evaluation of, and the ability to handle or to present the facets and implications of extraordinary and complex moral problems involving high stakes. Excellence in the latter relates instead to more ordinary decisions, repeated or typical acts, social interactions, and relationships that last longer over time.

The model of moral experts we have discussed so far is mostly concerned with the former sphere, hence with helping non-experts clarify the contours of specific ethical problems and make sound moral judgments. But this model is somewhat silent about the diachronic dimension involved in the development of one's moral character, motivation, and behavior, where what matters is reliably making good moral decisions over time in ordinary situations. This is what the next account of a moral expert focuses on.

4 The Skilled Agent Account

As anticipated in the introduction, if we look at how the term 'moral expert' is deployed in the discussion within virtue ethics, particularly amongst proponents of the skill model of virtue (Bloomfield 2001; De Caro et al. 2024; Russell 2009; Swartwood 2013; Stichter 2018; Tsai 2024), we get a substantially different picture of what it takes to possess moral expertise than the one proposed by the epistemic authority account. According to this view, which we call the *skilled agent* account, moral expertise has to do with the possession of moral virtue or wisdom, intended as a practical skill that allows those who possess it to act as morally good people and, more broadly, to live well and flourish.

¹³ Here 'reliable' can be intended in the strong sense or in the weaker one endorsed by Schaefer & Savulescu.

¹⁴ See also Herdova (2018). This idea has its roots in Aristotle's considerations about skills and practical wisdom (NE, VI): while refraining from deploying a skill (*techne*) one has acquired does not make one less skillful, acting in a way that goes against practical wisdom reveals that one lacks practical wisdom.

¹⁵ Note that Singer (1972) briefly mentions that moral experts should care about doing what is right, without discussing this point any further.

The skilled agent account benefits from Gilbert Ryle's seminal work on the relationship between knowledge-that and knowledge-how (2009). Ryle showed that knowledge-how cannot be reduced to knowledge-that, as two people can know all the same propositions about a given topic and nonetheless differ in what they know how to do. Even worse, one might learn everything there is to know about a topic—say, the theory of skiing—but still be incapable of standing on the skis and going down a slope. Knowing how to ski involves practicing a technique until deciding what to do on the skis becomes intuitive and automatic, thereby ceasing to require the constant mediation of conscious representations or explicit deliberation. Even more radically, according to Ryle, practical competence in some areas—notably, chess—can be acquired merely through practical experience, through corrections and examples, hence without requiring a background of theoretical knowledge (2009: p. 29).¹⁶

The skilled agent account of moral expertise hands these considerations over to the ethical domain. Despite some internal differences, extant versions of this account agree on at least two main points: first, moral experts ought to display a proficient level of knowledge-how that ensures their reliable success in doing the right thing at the right time; second, moral expertise generally manifests through intuitive, automatic responses that are nonetheless informed, trained, or educated by reflection and practice. Although experts do not need the support of conscious, reflective cognitive processes most of the time (especially in front of familiar situations and problems), they might rely on explicit and effortful deliberation on occasion (especially in front of novel or particularly complex problems). This is the sense in which this view is *anti-intellectualist* in spirit: unlike the epistemic authority account, for which ethical competence amounts to some form of knowledge-that, the skilled agent model cashes out the superiority of moral experts in terms of knowledge-how, a set of skills that a competent performer can deploy without retaining any propositional or theoretical knowledge.

According to Dreyfus & Dreyfus' seminal account (1991), the acquisition of moral expertise follows a clear developmental trajectory. Reliance on 'knowledge-that' is only required in the novice stage, typical of children who need to grasp simple concepts and follow simple rules—e.g., never lie. Over time, the child learns to contextualize the rule—e.g., never lie except when someone might be seriously hurt by telling the truth—and, through exercise and habituation, develops a proper 'knowledge-how' to apply the rule in a variety of different situations. At the expert level, the agent has developed an intuitive and automatic

skill, requiring no conscious deliberation in problematic but familiar situations. It is only when the agent is facing unfamiliar situations presenting them with novel problems that they have to appeal to abstract principles, hence the reasoning typical of detached deliberation (241). In ordinary situations, moral experts need not be able to explain why they behave as they do. They therefore may well lack the ability to share their moral competence with others, as an anti-intellectualist account requires (Weinstein 1994).

Dreyfus & Dreyfus' version of the skilled agent account has been recently criticized by Matt Stichter (2018), according to which it failed to provide robust and consistent psychological grounds for a developmental account of expertise. Stichter's version of a skilled agent account is built on two key psychological pillars. On the one hand, he draws from social cognitive theories of agency (e.g., Mischel and Shoda 1995) to account for skill acquisition in terms of self-regulation, which involves a motivational dimension aimed at setting a specific goal, and volitional activities aimed at determining the means to obtain such goal. On the other hand, he relies on dual process theories of cognition (e.g., Kahneman 2011) to explain how skilled performance becomes effortless through exercise. What matters most for this paper, though, is that Stichter too rejects the idea that intellectual requirements such as explicit theoretical knowledge or reference to rules and principles are either necessary or sufficient for virtuous action. In his account, moral experts have automatized a reliable response to the morally relevant inputs they receive from the environment and can therefore devote their cognitive resources to assessing the impact of their conduct on other people and making sure that they are acting virtuously. Furthermore, moral experts find themselves acting in what Csikszentmihalyi (1991) calls a state of flow: that is, they are immersed in the activity, are not thinking self-consciously about their performance, and importantly, exert no self-control to avoid being distracted. This is why according to Stichter, moral experts often “cannot articulate how they knew to act in a particular situation” and “cannot necessarily explain why [...] a particular course of action occurred to them” (2018: p. 66).¹⁷

The skilled agent account opens the door to at least two problems. First, as we just discussed, this account makes reliable moral conduct key to the possession of moral expertise. Yet standards of moral correctness are a matter of philosophical dispute. Someone might act perfectly in accordance with the prevailing common-sense morality of their society and era, being considered by many as virtuous or wise. But a foreigner, a member of a following generation, or even a contemporary critic of that particular moral system might

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, Ryle was largely skeptical about moral expertise. For a discussion, see e.g., Singer (1972) and Driver (2013).

¹⁷ Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow is problematic: for criticisms see, e.g., Montero (2016), Soderman (2021).

view some of the deeply rooted dispositions and automatic responses in that person's character and practical identity as wrong or belonging to an obsolete past that needs to be transcended. For instance, some of the behaviors of that alleged moral expert may be harmful, disrespectful, or exclude structurally discriminated subjects in their community. In Singer's words, "only if the moral code of one's society were perfect and undisputed, both in general principles and in their application to particular cases, would there be no need for the morally good man to be a thinking man. Then he could just live by the code, unreflectively." (1972, p. 116).

Secondly, the fact that some individuals might be intuitively compliant with an accepted moral standard but unable to justify their actions and the automatic expression of their moral outlook to others cannot but be a limitation. The intersubjective justification of one's actions is a central aspect of moral practice and associated life more broadly (Darwall 2009; Habermas 1984; Scanlon 2000); without it, radically subjectivist, paternalistic, or dogmatic approaches to morality—where it doesn't matter if someone disagrees with another's point of view—might prevail, risking to make complex moral issues, disagreements, and the expression of reasons and justified perspectives extremely difficult to handle. This can lead either to authoritative, conservative, and exclusivist views or to an excessive fragmentation of viewpoints, and to their legitimation even if they lack rational or intersubjective justification.

Although independent, these objections can be connected. In a context where there is significant agreement on a set of core moral norms or principles, those who are more compliant with, or able to apply the shared moral standard are easily recognized and treated as moral experts, without the need for explicit or extensive justifications. However, when contrasting perspectives on values, norms, and moral principles coexist (as often occurs concurrently with significant social, economic, and technological changes), the skilled agent account can become more problematic. In these circumstances, it may be harder to find moral standards immediately shared by everybody; and the justification of individual behaviors as well as of entire systems of norms or principles, along with the right to demand, challenge, reject a justification or express one's own, becomes crucial to handle moral conflicts.

Our aim here is not to address these objections but rather to show that they constitute serious problems for this account, at least in specific circumstances. As regards the first problem, we have noted that proponents of this view take moral experts to be agents who comply with objective moral standards in their conduct better than most individuals. But to assume that there are objective moral values on which everyone should converge amounts to underestimating, if not dismissing, the relevance of pluralism and disagreement among moral standards. If we agree that there can

be deep moral disagreements, we cannot expect that moral experts are unable to account for the decisions they make in the moral domain or that they merely appeal to the moral framework they subscribe to. Rather, it seems necessary that moral experts can articulate the reasons why they behave as they do.

It should be noted, though, that morality is not just a pure clash of perspectives, as much as it is not a perfectly harmonious and consistent domain. There are complex and uncertain cases as well as less controversial ones where even reflective—not just acritical—agreement can persist (think about norms regulating ordinary family relationships). Compared to complex moral dilemmas, in more ordinary moral situations it appears less problematic to consider those who perform well in accordance with the shared standard as morally more competent than others, even if they do not possess a profound theoretical understanding of morality or the ability to articulate their choices in a conceptually sophisticated way. Consider the following example:

Julie [...] is, by all accounts, a morally good person: honest, caring, and kind. She is also extremely morally competent; for any moral situation she finds herself in, she does the right thing because it strikes her as the right thing to do, and it strikes her as the right thing to do because she responds to the morally relevant features of the situation. [However,] when pressed for an explanation, she might just shrug her shoulders and offer: "it's just the right thing to do." Or perhaps: "it would be unkind not to help." (2017: p. 541).

The example provides a plausible story of how someone might display moral expertise in the skilled agent sense—hence being reliably compliant with the moral standards of the community—without being able to justify their moral conduct.¹⁸ The fact that Julie cannot unpack the reasons underlying her virtuous moral conduct leaves her reliability in making good moral decisions untouched.

One way someone might resist this rejoinder is to argue that the skilled agent account cannot make sense of the role of moral experts in their community, which is providing moral advice, due to its anti-intellectualist commitment. At first glance, this objection appears to have a point, in that it seems plausible that good moral advisors ought to have the ability to explain why they act as they do. On closer inspection, though, proponents of the skilled agent account have a good response to offer. As Sliwa points out, there can well be several ways in which one can serve as a moral advisor in

¹⁸ For the sake of intellectual honesty, note that Sliwa—who most likely would subscribe to the epistemic authority account—offers this example in the discussion about understanding to argue that Julie has deep moral understanding despite the fact that she lacks the ability to give appropriate explanations of her moral judgments.

a community. Some do so by providing guidance via testimony; others through their behavior, by showing how skilled agents behave in morally relevant situations, as moral exemplars do (542).¹⁹ As in any other developmental process, it is fundamental to have role models or exemplars to look at for at least two key reasons. First, they show what competent behavior looks like and serve as a term of comparison for those who are learning the skills. Second, they can help one find the motivation to start or persist in the journey of acquiring a skill, which is a time- and energy-consuming endeavor (Zagzebski 2017).

These final remarks open the door to the pluralist view we shall outline and defend in the final section of this paper. The fact that we need both kinds of guidance in the moral domain surely counts as an important reason for favoring a theory of moral expertise that can make room for both epistemic authorities and skilled agents.

5 Moral Expertise: A Pluralist Account

So far, we have presented and discussed two contrasting models of moral expertise. On the one hand, a highly demanding approach according to which several epistemic requirements must be met in order to understand morally complex situations, know how to address them, and help others navigate them. On the other hand, a performative model according to which moral experts are those who act and live well, having the dispositions and intuitions to consistently make the right choices, even if they do not know how to justify them or teach others how to act and live well. Let us now return to one of the questions we posed at the beginning of this article. What if, in order to be a moral expert, one needs *both* kinds of excellence—theoretical and practical? Is the best model of moral expertise to be sought in a synthesis between the two accounts we discussed so far?

A few authors—also coming from the virtue ethics tradition—have defended a *hybrid* approach by adding some epistemic requirements to the performative model. It is, in fact, the idea of “purely” performative models that experts need not master the *logos* of their skills that these scholars reject. Proponents of hybrid accounts hold that, along with the practical skills or know-how required by the skilled agent model, moral expertise also involves possessing propositional moral knowledge (know-that) or understanding. According to Annas (2011), besides the developmental dimension typical of practical skills, moral expertise also involves an intelligent grasp of morally relevant and complex situations, the principles that need to be applied in such

contexts, and the capacity to apply them correctly. This surely translates into a particular kind of competence, but not a purely practical one. Unlike the skilled agent model, Annas’ hybrid approach also requires a set of intellectual skills that allow moral experts to explain why they act as they do: that is, they are able to articulate the reasons behind their actions and teach, or somehow transmit, their skills (19).

Similarly, Narvaez (2005) and Narvaez & Lapsley (2005) include both ‘know-how’ and ‘know-that’ in their account of moral expertise, which involves declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge. In a nutshell, moral experts possess accurate information about the moral domain (declarative knowledge), know how to act within the domain (procedural knowledge), and have knowledge about when and why the first two kinds of knowledge ought to be applied in particular circumstances (conditional knowledge). In this framework, besides implicit learning of practical skill, the development of moral expertise involves the transmission of explicit ‘knowledge-that’ through an intergenerational transfer from experts to apprentices.

At first glance, it surely looks as though hybrid accounts, by adding intellectualist conditions to a fundamentally practical model, attempt to bring the skilled agent account one step closer to the epistemic authority one. Yet it is helpful to highlight two important respects in which their view remains significantly different from the epistemic approach. The first difference concerns how they understand the epistemic superiority of moral experts. The procedural epistemic authority models we have discussed in Sect. 2 assume a more pluralist framework according to which there might be several appropriate but competing answers to complex moral problems: what matters most is *how* one addresses and justifies a decision, rather than its substantive output. This approach conceives of moral experts’ superiority in terms of non-factive moral understanding rather than factive moral knowledge. Instead, hybrid accounts have fewer qualms about using the concept of moral knowledge in the strong (realist, factive) sense because the moral theory they typically defend revolves around the idea of objective forms of excellence of character in specific historical and cultural contexts where standards of correctness, goodness, and excellence are clearly defined and shared. Moreover, in the Neo-Aristotelian tradition, the emphasis on what makes a good life often takes the form of naturalistic moral realism: some traits and behaviors are good because they objectively contribute to human flourishing.²⁰ Hence, hybrid accounts conceive moral experts as individuals who have knowledge or (factive) understanding of what is objectively good.

¹⁹ See Croce (2020) for a defense of an anti-intellectualist account of moral exemplarity.

²⁰ See, e.g., Foot (2001), Geach (1956), Hacker-Wright (2015).

The second difference concerns the function that moral experts are supposed to fulfill in their community. Hybrid accounts have a clear advantage over skilled agent views, in that they can accommodate the idea that moral experts not only provide guidance by their example but also via testimony. However, the testimonial advice they can offer should not be confused with the advice that moral experts provide on the epistemic authority model. The latter, as we have seen, conceives moral advice in terms of background information about ethical matters as well as an opinionated assessment of the courses of action available to the advisee in complex situations and their moral implications. Instead, the former conceives moral advice in terms of an explanation of the virtuous agent's conduct in a specific circumstance. The difference lies in the requirements moral experts ought to fulfill to provide these kinds of advice: in hybrid views moral experts need not possess a philosophical background, whereas in epistemic agent accounts moral experts need not be motivated to act well.

These considerations justify dismissing the hybrid view as a solution to the main problems of the two accounts, as well as a convincing approach to the problem of moral expertise more generally. For one thing, it inherits the problematic commitment to objective moral standards from the skilled agent model. For another, it offers an unduly demanding theory that grants moral expertise only to those individuals who possess: (i) objective moral knowledge, (ii) moral virtue, and (iii) the intellectual skills required to discuss their conduct. It goes without saying that the hybrid account significantly narrows down the number of individuals to whom one can reasonably turn for guidance in the moral domain.

At this point, the reader might legitimately wonder what the reasons for endorsing a pluralist approach are given that, as we have argued in the previous sections, the hybrid view fares no better than the epistemic authority account and the skilled agent account, both of which appear to be problematic for independent reasons. As anticipated at the beginning of this paper, we think that a pluralist view of moral expertise is justified by functionalist considerations. We have seen that the two classical approaches have a very different idea of the role that moral experts can fulfill in a community. Epistemic authorities in the moral domain may serve the function of analysts, consultants, and perhaps even decision-makers in complex moral cases due to their greater knowledge, understanding, and implications of choices that can be used to take—or help others take—such complex decisions. This type of competence and function does not seem to require that epistemic authorities in the domain of morality also possess a whole set of moral virtues in other life circumstances (for example, in their private or relational lives). On the other hand, performative moral experts seem to serve the function (which can also be unconscious) of being examples to look up to and imitate in order to navigate

and behave well in social and interpersonal life. This competence does not seem to require theoretical knowledge at all; very often, these character traits are developed early in life, without the mediation of theoretical (let alone philosophical) knowledge. Virtues develop in various ways, one of which is the imitation of moral exemplars (Zagzebski 2017). This does not mean that the development of practical moral competence does not require reflection, but it is decidedly implausible that it requires sophisticated philosophical knowledge either.

If our analysis of the three accounts meets its target, it should now be evident why there does not seem any good reason to endorse a monistic account of moral expertise. If, despite some possible overlap, the epistemic authority model and the skilled agent model depict two different, in fact compatible, characterizations of what it is to be an expert in the moral domain, then reducing the notion to either model—or, as we have just argued, to the “intersection” between the two as proposed by hybrid accounts—amounts to an unnecessary limitation. Instead, those who with us wanted to endorse a pluralist view will simply have to explain why moral expertise turns out to have different meanings. This is no hard task, though. Endorsing a functionalist approach provides the resources to explain that moral experts can be very different types of individuals because they fulfill different roles within the community. While virtuous agents set the threshold of reliably good moral conduct and show moral competence in action in everyday situations, epistemic authorities in the moral domain can help us improve our understanding of ethical matters and make informed decisions in complex scenarios. This means that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and it does not seem necessary to take a stance in favor of one over the other, as each highlights distinct and equally important aspects of moral competence.

One key advantage of grounding a pluralist view of moral expertise in functionalist commitments is that it can account for specific instances of moral experts who combine the two functions at different degrees. Hence, the proposed approach makes room for moral experts like the ones defended by hybrid views. In fact, the community would benefit from having more moral experts who not only act well but can also explain why they behave as they do. Yet, in the pluralist view we endorse, we can also take advantage of more modest types of moral experts, who can either help us understand the complexities of some moral situations, as epistemic authorities do, or show us how we should act in other situations, as morally skilled agents do.

Our ambition in this paper was not to solve the problems affecting the epistemic authority account and the skilled agent account. Rather, we aimed to offer compelling reasons in favor of an alternative approach to moral expertise, namely one that defines what a moral expert is based on what moral experts can do for us. Regardless of how successfully

each view handles its internal problems, we are now in a position to claim that the current discussion of moral experts in moral epistemology, bioethics, and virtue ethics need not generate a conflict between competing definitions. Far from being mutually exclusive, these debates would benefit from broadening their reach and engaging more with each other. We hope we have provided a framework that favors and justifies this exchange.

6 Conclusion

When discussing moral experts, a series of ambiguities and misunderstandings immediately arise that can risk confusing the discourse, as interlocutors sometimes have in mind figures and types of expertise that are quite different from each other. That these ambiguities and misunderstandings arise is understandable; in this article we have sought to explain them and, hopefully, clarify the terms of the debate to facilitate further discussion on the topic.

In general, expertise requires at least two main types of competence—theoretical and practical. It is reasonable to expect this to occur in the domain of morality as well, within which there can be individuals who excel more in one or the other, as both experience and scientific literature on the subject suggest. Interest in one or the other type of competence has led different philosophical approaches and literatures to focus on different problems and, consequently, to point out different figures as possible moral experts. Some place their bets on theoretical experts: epistemic authorities who possess and are able to provide a greater understanding of complex moral situations, without necessarily leaning towards specific choices, moral theories, or systems of values or integrating them into their moral outlook and everyday life. Others bet on performative experts: individuals who, through experience, developed intuitive abilities and sensibilities that allow them to act morally well, even without explicit reflection, consistently over time and situations and better than most people.

We have argued that each of these approaches has limitations that make it unjustified to consider either type of excellence as a privileged model of excellence in the domain of morality. Although the two models are not mutually exclusive and a partial combination of the two appears possible, even a hybrid model seems not a good candidate to illustrate the constitutive features of a reference figure in the moral domain. The main argument we have put forth against a monistic thesis of moral expertise is of a functionalist kind. Different types of challenges can fall within the set of morally relevant situations: we mostly differentiated between complex cases that include conflicts between reasons, principles, interests, and values, on the one hand, and the cultivation of one's character for managing interactions

and lasting relationships over time, on the other. In light of this, we have argued for a pluralist position that recognizes the legitimacy of alternative perspectives on moral excellence—one intellectualist and not directly concerned with motivation and action, one anti-intellectualist and mostly concerned with motivation and action—as monistic solutions would inevitably overlook the fact that addressing different types of morally relevant situations requires different kinds of competencies.

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