Doubting Deference*

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Abstract: Deference is a belief formation process that occurs when one believes something in virtue of the fact that someone else believes it. Many philosophers have argued that we react differently to beliefs formed through deference in virtue of whether they are moral or non-moral, and that this psychological reaction is evidence for distinct features of the moral domain. This paper presents six worries concerning the use of this evidence in metaethics for drawing conclusions about distinct features of morality. A theory is proposed to explain reactions to moral deference stemming from concerns about this theoretical construct.

Keywords: deference, moral judgment, moral psychology, expertise, advice, belief, intuition

Deference occurs when an agent forms a belief because another agent holds that belief. An agent defers to another agent when she believes, for example, that "the earth is flat" or "Rowan Atkinson is funny" precisely because another agent believes that "the earth is flat" or "Rowan Atkinson is funny". Moral deference is a kind of deference that occurs when the belief in question is moral as opposed to non-moral, such as the belief "eating meat is wrong". As young children, forming moral beliefs in this way appears to play an important

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* This is a draft of July 2, 2021. Please check before citing.

role in our moral education and acquaintance with moral notions (e.g. Kohlberg 1984). As we grow older, we might defer to others more knowledgeable or experienced than ourselves when facing novel situations, for example, regarding palliative care or social justice issues. In some cases, this may even seem like a good way to form beliefs, when we have reason to believe that our reasoning could be compromised, due to our emotional connections to the subject or the presence of other biasing or prejudicial factors (for examples, see Sliwa 2012; Thomas 1993).

However, many philosophers report that something also seems problematic about forming moral beliefs in this way (Davia and Palmira 2015; Driver 2006; Enoch 2014; Hills 2009; Hopkins 2007; Jones 1999; McGrath 2011; Williams 1995). Bernard Williams famously claimed that there are “no ethical experts” and that deferring to ethicists has implications that are “presumably not accepted by anyone” (Williams 1995: 205). Sarah McGrath writes that while “there is something off-putting about the idea of arriving at one’s moral views by simply deferring to an expert” there is “no problem with deferring to a tax specialist about one’s taxes” (McGrath 2011: 111), concluding from this that “moral deference seems more problematic than deference in many other domains” (ibid, p. 115). Similarly, David Enoch writes that “there is something fishy about this way of forming a moral belief, that it feels importantly different—and not for the better—from more standard ways of forming moral beliefs” (Enoch 2014: 237).

The claim that moral deference causes a negative psychological reaction of some kind has subsequently been invoked as evidence for various distinct features of morality. It has been used in a broad range of metaethical arguments concerning, for example, moral realism (McGrath 2011), moral expertise (Driver 2006), moral character (Howell 2014),

virtue (Ahlstrom-Vij 2015), moral knowledge, and moral understanding (Hills 2009, 2013; Hopkins 2007). A major research goal in recent metaethics has been to discover what feature or features of morality must be true in order to best explain reactions to moral deference. Even philosophers who ultimately defend such beliefs acknowledge that they are "suspicious" and that this is a "phenomenon to be explained" (Enoch 2014: 236).

The following assumptions are commonly made in discussions of moral deference. One assumption is that moral deference strikes us as wrong or somehow problematic in some significant number of cases representative of the moral domain. Call this the deviance of moral deference:

> *Deviance*: there is something that seems problematic about the practice of moral deference.

A second assumption is that deviance tracks something unique about the nature of morality. Though this assumption has been expanded in recent years, to perhaps track something about the normative domain including both moral and aesthetic claims more broadly, for now we will focus on the moral case (see below). To warrant distinct conclusions about morality, it must be that deference seems problematic to us because of factors that are uniquely associated with the moral domain, and not confounding factors that are not uniquely associated with morality or could be explained by other non-moral variables. Call this the distinctiveness of moral deference:

> *Distinctiveness*: deviance arises in virtue of distinct features of the moral domain.

Deviance and distinctiveness are required for metaethical conclusions about deference because if cases of moral deference are not any more problematic than deference in closely matched cases involving non-moral beliefs, then these reactions are not good evidence for

theorizing about distinct features of the moral domain over and above either features common to the belief formation process of deference or by factors generally shared by both moral and non-moral domains.

This paper challenges the deviance and distinctiveness of moral deference, and in turn, the appropriateness of using this source of evidence for drawing strong conclusions about the nature of morality. Six worries are raised concerning the appeal to these psychological reactions for reliable theorizing in metaethics. In what follows, it is argued that expertise is a red herring that likely does not explain negative reactions to moral deference, that comparisons between moral and nonmoral domains are confounded by several factors including conscientiousness and wording effects, that comparisons are selectively chosen to support the phenomenon, and that the theoretical framework is implausible and prone to generate unreliable psychological evidence.

The first worry is that expertise is a red herring to diagnosing reactions to deference in the moral domain. It may be tempting to think that moral deference is deviant when non-moral deference is not because of distinct facts about expertise in the moral domain. According to this line of thinking, it is appropriate to defer to experts, but moral experts are either impossible to identify or do not exist, and therefore, this explains why moral deference is deviant. But negative reactions to deference are not uniquely explained by concerns about moral expertise and do not warrant distinct conclusions about moral expertise. The argument for this claim takes the form of a pincer motion: if there are experts it is problematic to defer to and many non-experts it is unproblematic to defer to then it is unlikely that expertise is diagnostic of these reactions. That is, if positive and negative

reactions to deference in the non-moral domain are disconnected from expertise in these ways, then it is unclear what this tells us about expertise in the moral domain.

On the one hand, there are many individuals who both qualify as experts in various disciplinary senses and who seem problematic to defer to across several domains. Here are four concrete examples. First, there is a non-trivial minority of professional geoscientists hesitant to accept the reality of human-caused climate change (Lefsrud and Meyer 2012) and health care workers who continue to smoke cigarettes (Pesut, Milovanovic, Bulajic, and Bozic 2010). Deferring to these individuals is likely to be problematic. Second, there are many well documented ways in which experts reliably fail in virtue of their expertise and well-known costs to expertise that can sometimes make experts worse at performing various tasks (Dawes 1971; Hinds 1999; Johnson 1988). For example, experts are worse than non-experts at predicting how novices will perform at various domain specific tasks (Hinds 1999). This suggests that deviance will arise for domain specific performances shown to negatively correlate with expertise. Third, there are many ways that experts become biased when evaluating topics within their domain of expertise that questions deference. For example, physicians are arguably the relevant experts concerning medical treatment, but this does not mean there should not be rules and oversight concerning what substances can be prescribed, how money is to be accepted from pharmaceutical companies, or for revising outdated medical procedures. It was perhaps the observation that scientific knowledge is so often the product of its time and imbedded within a particular social context that led Richard Feynman to famously remark that, “science is the belief in the ignorance of experts” (Feynman 2000; see also Reid 2011). Fourth, a related set of observations has been made in the aesthetics literature concerning aesthetic beliefs and

aesthetic testimony. There is broad agreement that there is some kind of important epistemic difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony and that the latter is somehow less optimal than the former (Meskin 2004; Robson 2012). This reaction purportedly exists even though art experts clearly exist.

On the other hand, there are many individuals who do not qualify as experts it seems unproblematic to defer to across several domains. For example, it is completely unproblematic to defer to a server at a restaurant when choosing between two meals. It is unproblematic even if the server is not an expert in any meaningful sense over and above being only slightly more familiar with the offerings than you are. It is equally unproblematic for me to defer to my colleague Joel when filling out forms and navigating university bureaucracy, even though he is not an expert in these matters and would actively resent the implication that he was. More generally, if an individual is a bad enough decision maker or has limited enough information, then they should probably defer to pretty much anyone in a better epistemic position then they are. Together, these observations that experts can be problematic and non-experts unproblematic to defer to in the non-moral domain suggest that identifying experts is a red herring to evaluating deference in the moral domain. Pursuant to that thought, given that 'expertise' is a term with so many connotations, disciplinary norms, and social variation, it is probably best avoided.

The second worry is that the distinctiveness of moral deference is likely the product of comparisons that are confounded by conscientiousness. In principle at least, a deferring agent might form a belief because another agent holds that belief with minimal prior deliberation about it. However, an agent might also defer to others after an extended deliberative process fails to yield a decision. This possibility demonstrates that dereference

can occur with different levels of deliberation and conscientiousness (compare Hills 2009; Hopkins 2007). Given that conscientious agents are generally judged more favorably than non-conscientious ones, deriving deviance only in cases involving unconscientious behavior is trivial. And as it turns out, several cases in the literature meant to illustrate the deviance and distinctiveness of moral deference happen to feature cases of unconscientious agents. For example, consider the case of Eleanor the Vegetarian:

> 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. (Hills, 2009, p. 94, emphasis added)

Consciousnesseses often requires us to think further about important issues in both moral and non-moral domains. Wording to the contrary is likely to bias our evaluations of agents as unconsciousness. The factor is orthogonal to either deference or deference in the moral domain. To see this, consider non-moral cases that also feature agents who display patterns of unconscientious behavior. For example, consider agents who do not bother to "think further" about factual matters such as whether their employees are paid equally, whether they interrupt female colleagues more than their male colleagues, whether a company they work for is releasing toxic chemicals, and even in the case of vegetarianism, whether animals can feel pain. A belief is likely to appear problematic if it thought to be reached unconscientiously. But not thinking further about important topics of social concern is often unacceptable regardless of whether or not deference is involved.

The third worry is that deviance and distinctiveness are likely the product of selective comparisons in content. It is unilluminating to cherry-pick cases of moral deference without comparing those reactions to non-moral cases serving as closely matched controls. The reason stems from the broad definition of the central phenomenon to be explained. Deference covers a very large category of beliefs and vignettes involving them are highly susceptible to potential confounds and other thought-experimenter effects. For instance, consider the comparison between deferring to someone about taxes and vegetarianism. There are clear differences between moral questions and the specific intuitions and norms relating to tax law that undermine the clarity of this comparison. There are simply too many non-moral differences between these things to interpret reactions to this comparison as distinctively moral with much confidence. They are different in complexity, seriousness, convention, controversy, scope, legal regulation, their relations to other social norms, and so on, and any one of these things could be generating deviant reactions.

To illustrate this point, consider the following thought experiment about deference and capital punishment:

> I possess all of the non-moral information thought relevant to the moral permissibility of the death penalty that you possess, and I have no special reason to think that my judgment is impaired. On the basis of this information and my own careful consideration of the issue, either it seems to me that the death penalty is morally permissible, or I remain undecided. Nevertheless, I judge that the practice is not permissible, on the basis of your testimony to that effect. (McGrath, 2011, p. 114)

The death penalty is a serious and highly salient social issue, and positions that people take about it can be predicted by demographic variables and other individual differences (Miller and Hayward 2008). Given these facts, it is difficult to know how to interpret reactions to moral deference involving the death penalty without comparisons to other issues better matched in content. In other words, without closely matched thought experiments, researchers will be unable to evaluate the philosophical significance of their reactions for metaethical theorizing.

Controlling for differences in content by providing closely matched thought experiments can minimize deviance in non-moral cases and questions the distinctiveness of moral deference. To see this, consider for example the following pairs of thought experiments more equally matched. One is a case of moral deference:

> (Moral) Sarah is trying to decide whether eating meat is morally wrong for society. She considers the issue very carefully but does not reach a decision. She asks a trusted moral advisor who tells her that it definitely is morally wrong. Because of what the advisor said, she decides that eating meat is morally wrong.

While the other is a case of financial deference:

> (Financial) Sarah is trying to decide whether eating meat is financially costly for society. She considers the issue very carefully but does not reach a decision. She asks a trusted economic advisor who tells her that it definitely is financially costly. Because of what the advisor said, she decides that eating meat is financially costly.

When considering both cases, ask yourself the following question: was the way that Sarah made her decisions a good one? Perhaps there are positive and negative aspects to deferring to an advisor to decide these questions. However, the key point is that reactions to moral

and non-moral deference begin to align when matched in terms of content and subject matter. That is, when it comes to important factual questions involving related issues to the moral case such as vegetarianism, deference begins to seem suboptimal for both the moral and non-moral beliefs.

A fourth worry is that deference seems just as deviant for forming beliefs across a host of many other non-moral domains, which questions whether this reaction tells us something unique about the moral domain. Again, in the case of aesthetic beliefs, it seems deviant to believe artworks funny or disgusting or soothing because others believe those things as it does for moral beliefs (Robson 2012). Philosophers have argued that it is deviant when it comes to conducting philosophical inquiry and forming beliefs about philosophical claims (Allen 2019; Locke 1690 (1975); Reid 2011) and similar attitudes have been echoed by famous scientists concerning many scientific beliefs (Feynman 2000). Outside of research contexts, it is just as deviant to defer to others about beliefs that significantly impact our lives in the course of practical reasoning, such as whether you believe you will have two children instead of one, pursue a graduate career in philosophy, or move across the world to accept a job offer. It is deviant in the political domain when it comes to joining a political party or adopting an economic policy. It is deviant in the religious or metaphysical domains when it comes to the belief in the existence of god or the tenants of a new religion. It is deviant for personal matters, such as sexual orientation or gender identity. It is even deviant in the financial domain, when it comes to the economic benefits or costs of complex claims involving broad topics, such as reparations, self-driving cars, the UK leaving the EU, universal income, or immigration policy. These observations suggest that deference can be deviant in seemingly all domains of personal, social, and

political life. Some philosophers have even argued that deviance could occur for beliefs insofar as they are bad for liberal society and democracy (Hazlett 2017). Conclusions about the moral domain require a more systematic investigation of reactions to deference within and across domains and extrapolating theoretical features of morality from such reactions is premature.

A fifth worry is that deference conflicts with what appears to be the consensus view in contemporary philosophy of mind about belief. According to the consensus view, belief is involuntary (Bennett 1990; Scott-Kakures 1994; c.f. Turri, Rose, and Buckwalter 2017). It is impossible to choose or refuse to believe something at will. It is often said that one reason for this is because belief aims at truth (Hieronymi 2006). However, deference is said to occur not because something is true, but because another person believes that it is true and one chooses to adopt the belief on this basis. This creates the following tension regarding deference. Either doxastic voluntarism is false and we can choose to believe solely because someone else believes it, or deference as currently defined is impossible. It is impossible because doxastic involuntarism rules out the possibility of forming beliefs in this way. It rules this out because a subject forming a belief that p on the basis of the fact another person believes p would ultimately require that the subject also think it's true that p or take the other person's belief as evidence for the truth of p. Thus, it would not be possible to form a belief only because another person believes it. Another possibility, though not a very plausible one, is that belief is perfectly involuntary, it's just that it aims at accepting what other people believe independently of the truth. In either case, it becomes difficult to reconcile these notions with the idea that beliefs are formed by choice or without concern for truth.

The fact that these notions are at least prime facie difficult to reconcile with one another may provide a new psychological explanation of many negative reactions to deference. In short, the hypothesis is that deviance reflects an underlying suspicion with the notion of deference. That is, it could be that deviance occurs not because there is something being regarded as particularly defective about the content of such beliefs or the subjects who make them, per se, but rather an implicit skepticism that beliefs in general could be formed or are being formed in this way. This explanation suggests two potential mechanisms at play in negative reactions. First, stipulating details in philosophical thought experiments or other stimuli that run counter to ordinary life may generally cause tension and confusion. Second, running roughshod over belief in this way might lead to doubt that characters in such thought experiments actually form the beliefs they are said to form in the first place. When presented with a thought experiment where a character defers to a friend that the death penalty is morally wrong without thinking about it too much, for example, we might, contrary to what is stated in the story, doubt that the character actually genuinely believes that. On this account, the degree to which something seems fishy about deference tracks the degree to which we believe that protagonists genuinely believe in these ways. Further research into the psychology of these reactions is necessary to test whether this hypothesis explains negative affective responses.

A sixth worry concerns the psychology of deference and its role in decision making. In short, deference is a rare and psychologically implausible belief formation mechanism and as a result of this evaluations of it are likely to be unreliable. According to the definition under consideration, deference occurs when one forms a belief because another agent holds that belief. This does not merely mean treating someone else as holding a belief as one

possible reason for forming that belief. Nor does it mean seeking advice or turning to others for help. To distinguish deference from advice seeking and the weighing of evidence, deference is said to occur when one forms a belief solely on the basis of another holding a belief (McGrath 2011) or without any access to reasons (see also Hills 2013 on "pure moral testimony"). But it is highly unlikely and maybe even psychologically impossible for human beings to form beliefs in this manner. This is because it is unlikely that people have absolutely no prior exposure to the relevant subject of deference. Human beings have numerous background beliefs and interests that almost always relate to new questions in one way or another. New beliefs are weighed against a complex mix of experiences, assumptions, feelings, memories, and further reasoning. It is unrealistic to think that these things will not contribute explicitly or implicitly to instances of deference when forming a new belief. Some of those background beliefs include beliefs about individual people that we use to identify which agents to defer to in the first place. Rarely if ever do human beings defer to others without knowing absolutely anything about them, and seldom does this process occur without at least some minimal reference to reasons or involve other background beliefs.

Consider for example, the case of deferring to a tax specialist, which is often used to illustrate the propriety of non-moral deference. Notice that reactions to deference in this case depend on several factors beyond the scope of the phenomenon. Our evaluation depends on beliefs about the expert in question. These beliefs are based on reasons. Deferring to a random tax specialist we didn’t choose is likely to be viewed as deviant, which suggests that reasons are ultimately playing a role in the resulting belief. Evaluations also depend on our own beliefs about the correctness of the information one is deferring

to. Deferring to tax advice that blatantly does not cohere with common sense, significantly deviates from our priors, or is wildly incorrect or illegal will often be viewed as deviant. We typically run tax advice through these internal filters to some degree. But if deviance is partially a function of prior beliefs as deference deviates from priors, then this suggests that we are consulting more than just the fact another holds a belief in the first instance. The psychological implausibility of beliefs formed solely on the basis of others suggests that philosophical accounts of deference must allow for these other influences if philosophers wish to evaluate the propriety of a belief formation process that likely ever happens.

Of course, there is certainly a large divide between making up one's own mind with no reliance on testimonial sources, on the one hand, and believing solely on the basis of the fact that another holds a belief, on the other. Many beliefs likely reside somewhere in between. Beliefs will almost always be formed through some combination of testimonial and non-testimonial sources and at least some implicit access to reasons and other psychological processes. Setting deference aside, then, a reasonable question might become whether it is disproportionately appropriate to prioritize testimonial sources over non-testimonial sources across domains of inquiry when these sorts of things are both present. However, once the phenomenon of interest is expanded to involve believing things in light of this psychological reality, it is difficult to see what is distinctly puzzling or unique about moral deference, as opposed to a general philosophical question about weighing testimony. It is often taken as a given that the strong weighting of testimonial sources can be proper, admirable or in some cases perhaps even required, when it comes to moral beliefs.

In summary, psychological reactions to moral deference are often taken as evidence for metaethical conclusions concerning the moral domain. Specifically, moral deference is often taken as deviant and that this deviance is distinct from reactions to deference in non-moral domains. The present paper presents six worries concerning the use of this evidence in metaethical theorizing. Deviance and distinctness of moral deference over non-moral deference is likely the product of confounding variables, uncontrolled comparisons, wording effects, cherry-picked cases, and lack of conceptual or psychological plausibility concerning deference. In light of these worries, it is reasonable at the present level of evidence to suspend appeals to psychological reactions to deference for establishing unique features of the moral domain until they are addressed.

These conclusions suggest several positive steps forward for generating more reliable evidence about deference. First, researchers should conduct a more systematic investigation of reactions within and across domains that draws on a more representative set of cases involving deference. Second, this investigation should invoke domain comparisons more closely controlled for non-moral differences in content, such as complexity and subject matter. Third, researchers should consider the psychological plausibility of the conceptual framework under question. If it is not conceptually or psychologically possible to form a belief solely in virtue of the fact another agent holds a belief, then it might be more profitable to explore more realistic questions, for example, concerning the manner in which we weigh evidence, or react to testimony from others, in various domains.

One positive development in the literature on deference is that many authors have begun to explore whether deference might also sometimes seem problematic in other

domains beyond just morality. As mentioned above, several philosophers have noted that negative reactions to deference sometimes occur in the aesthetic domain (Andow 2018; Hazlett 2017; Robson 2012). This may suggest that the distinctiveness is too strong, and deviance pertains not the moral but broadly normative domain. On the other hand, other philosophers have argued that this reaction extends to academic subjects that are descriptive in nature, and that this tells us something important about the nature of philosophical research specifically (Allen 2019). One important question for future research, then, is whether the worries above explain deviance across these descriptive and normative domains, such as selective comparisons or wording effects, and similarly, whether we should be cautious in drawing strong conclusions about them until these reactions are better understood. Strong conclusions about the nature of the normative domain, as opposed to the descriptive domain may also be as unwarranted as strong conclusions about the moral domain. Another potential avenue for future research is to study whether these reactions to deference are indicative of the same phenomenon or if they are distinct. If they are indicative of the same phenomenon, then the ability of a theory to explain reactions across each of the domains in which it arises by appeal to only properties shared by those domains would be both a significant advantage and constraint on a theory of deference.

The conclusions above also suggest several opportunities or methodological improvement. First, a greater initial understanding of the psychological mechanism to be explained is needed before the philosophical significance of that mechanism can be evaluated. The reaction that something "seems fishy" may serve as an initial spark to inquiry, but is unlikely to sustain strong philosophical claims without further specification.

Second, when evidence concerning the phenomenon to be explained is empirical in nature, in this case, a psychological reaction to how deference strikes us, the tools of experimental cognitive science might also profitably be brought to bear on investigating the matter. The benefits are demonstrated in principle at least by observing confounds and thought-experimenter effects in cases used to establish deviance or distinctives in the deference literature (for an experimental investigation in aesthetics see Andow 2018). Third, when evaluating psychological reactions to a theoretical construct, such as deference, it is important to also consider the psychological realities of that construct. Doing so may help theorists to estimate the evidential weight they should place on such reactions and the plausibility of that construct for future theorizing.

Acknowledgements – [Omitted]

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