

Moral Objectivity as Trustworthiness

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Introduction

The central claim of this paper is that in order to address the problem of ethics across borders we ought to re-conceptualize moral objectivity in terms of trustworthiness. I use the term ‘borders’ broadly to refer to those features of ethical life that generate significant diversity and inequality among people such as cultural and religious differences, but also social divisions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, or differences in global location. The problem of ethics across borders is a problem about how moral knowledge claims can be established among people who are diverse and unequally situated. I argue that moral claims are objectively justified to the extent that they are trustworthy for all those who are to accept them. My argument is inspired by Naomi Scheman’s suggestion that we conceptualize scientific objectivity as trustworthiness.¹ In the first section of this paper, I discuss briefly the relevant aspects of Scheman’s account. In the second section of the paper, drawing from her analysis, I defend the claim that we ought to characterize moral objectivity as trustworthiness. I then consider an example that illustrates how conceptualizing moral objectivity in terms of trustworthiness can advance the project of ethics across borders.

Scheman on Objectivity

In her article, “Epistemology Resuscitated: Objectivity as Trustworthiness,” Naomi Scheman argues defends a conception of scientific objectivity as trustworthiness. She states: “a sustainable attribution of objectivity serves to underwrite a significant degree of—objectively refutable—authority, and it does so by rationally grounding trust”. For example, when scientists recommend certain results as objective, they commend these outcomes to the rest of us as (scientifically) authoritative, in the sense that these claims are supposed to portray an empirically accurate picture of the natural world and not simply reflect a scientist’s own interests or values. Since most of us cannot independently verify scientific claims, when we think we are warranted in believing the results of science is it because we trust that they are in fact empirically accurate.² Scheman emphasizes the importance of objectivity for grounding knowledge claims across difference and inequality, when trust must be established among people who are in various ways—spatially, temporally, culturally, attitudinally, cognitively—distant from one another.

If objective judgments are judgments we can rationally trust, then the project of assessing objectivity becomes a matter of assessing what or whom to trust and under what conditions it is rational to trust. We need to make credibility judgments about those on whom we are dependent in order to know whether and to what extent it is rational to place our trust in them. The conventional view in philosophy of science for assessing the credibility is what Scheman calls an

¹ Naomi Scheman, “Epistemology Resuscitated: Objectivity as Trustworthiness”, in *Engendering Rationalities* edited by Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

² Scheman, 2001:25.

internalist approach. Internalists emphasize the role of the *methods* of science in establishing the competence and regulating the integrity of scientists (33). The methods of science are designed to rule out the biasing effects of social injustice or cultural and religious diversity that characterize the world in which science is done (29). So long as these methods are used properly and followed rigorously, the scientific outcomes they generate are objectively justified—trustworthy—for any would be knower. Yet, a long history of racist and sexist science indicates that the methods of science have not successfully factored out of scientific claims the biasing impact of social injustice. The methods of science have not *in fact* proven reliable in generating trustworthy outcomes for all of those who are supposed to trust in them. “Trust needs to be convincingly demonstrated—and not just abstractly demonstrable” to those who are dependent (Scheman 35). Scheman argues that the myopic focus of an internalist approach on the inner workings of science is not well-equipped to identify these kinds of credibility failures, which have their roots in larger social causes.

As Scheman characterizes it, an internalist approach “fails to seriously confront the problem of justification *as it actually arises*.... The problem of justification as it actually arises for those of us who must decide whether and to what extent it is rational to trust in the claims of science, requires going “beyond and beneath” the norms and methods of scientific practice to take into account the social context within which science is done and the social identities of both those who make up the scientific community and those who are epistemically dependent on them. Credibility judgments of scientists, and the trustworthiness of scientific claims, rest in large part on *socially* grounded reasons for trust (32).

Three points in Scheman’s account are relevant for my argument regarding moral objectivity as trustworthiness: (1) first, trust emerges as epistemically crucial in situations of epistemic dependence, in which my being justified in believing some claim depends in whole or in part on other people; (2) second, measuring the trustworthiness of any particular claim involves assessing both the reliability of the methods of inquiry that are used to generate knowledge claims and the credibility (competence and integrity) of the people using those methods; and (3) third, measuring the reliability of knowledge practices and credibility of other knowers requires attention to moral, political, and social factors and not just narrowly defined epistemic factors.

Moral Objectivity as Trustworthiness

The suggestion that we understand moral objectivity in terms of trustworthiness is not a radical departure from the tradition in moral philosophy. Existing philosophical accounts of moral reasoning are designed to help agents step out of their actual social, cultural, and religious locations and into the moral point of view, so that they might see clearly what morality demands, over and above what social norms or religious dictates require. The impetus for this move is to secure the moral authority of a claim, for it is only then that the moral agent can *trust* that the claim carries moral weight and not just the weight of tradition or culture. So on the conventional view, moral objectivity is implicitly about establishing rationally grounded trust. However, the conventional approach in moral philosophy is limited in much the same way that the internalist

approach in philosophy of science is limited.

The conventional approach assumes that moral reasoning is something individuals do more or less by themselves, and that doing it well involves purifying our moral thinking as far as possible from the biasing impact of social, cultural, and religious influences. It is the job of moral philosophers to establish *methods* of moral reasoning, designed to factor out of moral knowledge claims the biasing effects of diversity and inequality, that any would be knower can use to generate objectively justified moral outcomes. We get a picture of moral agents monologically assessing their own and others' moral claims against standards furnished by the preferred moral theory. Just as internalists in science emphasize trust in the methods of science, on the conventional approach to moral reason our trust is placed in *methods*, which are supposed to mitigate the pernicious effects of difference and social injustice on our moral thinking.

There are striking parallels between Scheman's analysis of scientific objectivity and moral objectivity. First, as in the case of science, there is also long history in moral philosophy of theories that have been biased in favor of those with more social power; some have explicitly defined women and racial minorities as less morally competent; others have developed ideals for moral reasoning that are claimed to rely on abstract conceptions of human agency, but in fact represent modes of thinking and experiences of dominant group members. So one serious problem with the conventional approach to moral objectivity is that existing philosophical methods of moral reasoning have not done in practice what it is claimed that they do or ought to do; they have not in fact functioned to counter the biasing effects of social injustice, and so they have not in fact proven to be reliable mechanisms for establishing rationally grounded trust in moral authority of moral claims for all of those who are supposed to accept them.

Second, this narrow emphasis on *trust in methods*, which brackets the subjectivity of reasoners and the social context in which reasoning occurs, fails to confront the problem of justification as it actually arises for people in real-world moral situations. The problem of moral justification as it actually arises is "a problem about *people's claims* to knowledge and their *credibility* to enter those claims," to other people with whom they share a moral-social world.³ Real world moral justification is an inter-subjective achievement among embodied subjects, who share a moral-social context that is often already furnished with at least some shared terms and styles of reasoning.⁴ Moral objectivity involves rationally grounded trust, but trust has to be established *between and among* people who inhabit actual moral communities, and who may have different values and stand to each other in relations of inequality. Rather than develop methods of reasoning aimed at purifying our moral thinking by directing us to bracket diversity and inequality, we need to discern how trust can be established *under* these conditions.

[So how do we do this?] Margaret Walker introduces the idea of transparency testing as a way to measure whether conditions for rationally grounded trust in any particular situation are met.

³ See Margaret Urban Walker, 1998, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, Routledge Press.

⁴ Of course another problem of moral justification in the real world involves contact between dramatically diverse forms of life in which shared terms may not already exist but have to be forged. In my view, a naturalized model is also better equipped to address this issue, than more traditional philosophical accounts of moral reasoning. I say something about this in the final section of the paper.

Transparency testing is a critical tool that measures the extent to which any particular set of moral claims is trustworthy for *all* of those who are supposed to accept them, and not just for those who assert them. Specifically, a particular set of understandings is trustworthy to the extent that it is not held in place by any form of deception, coercion, manipulation, or epistemic rigging. We expose moral understandings that are not trustworthy by making them transparent, by trying to get behind or underneath them in order to “see through intervening media to what is really there.”⁵ If a particular set of understandings that is claimed to be “ours” turns out to require some kind of deception or manipulation by some of us directed toward others of us, then these understandings are not really “ours;” they are not morally warranted—trustworthy—for all those who are supposed to accept them, and in particular for those who are being deceived.⁶

Transparency testing provides a way to judge whether what is claimed about how moral knowledge is *supposed to be* produced matches up with how dominant moral understandings are *in fact* established and maintained in any particular case. The structure of moral justification involves how individuals-in-communities⁷ “show their moral *competence* and demonstrate their *integrity* to each other in entering and defending claims; how the terms and standards for claiming and justifying are kept in place or altered; and what reasonably confirms or undermines their authority” (Walker 66). So as in the case of science, assessing the trustworthiness of moral claims involves making credibility judgments about those who enter and defend claims to us, and such judgments must rely on social, cultural, religious, factors and not just narrowly defined epistemic factors. One virtue of transparency testing is that it allows us to do just this, to assess moral warrant—trustworthiness—without bracketing social or cultural identity; we make moral understandings transparent in terms already furnished by the moral context in question.

Example

I want to consider an example, which illustrates how we can use transparency testing to measure the trustworthiness, or lack thereof, of moral claims in a real-world situation.

This example is intra-communal, or within a moral community that has at least some shared vision of the good and shared understandings of how reliable moral teachings are produced, but in which moral reasoning takes place across the border of severe gender inequality. The Roman Catholic Church officially condemns the use of artificial forms of contraception as a grave sin. This teaching has had devastating consequences for many Catholic women (and men) across the globe. Women struggle to reconcile their faith with choices about limiting family size for economic considerations, protecting themselves from disease, or avoiding the physical and psychological difficulties that can attend pregnancy and childbirth. Catholic women who contest the hierarchy’s condemnation of contraception do so using already given, mutually recognizable terms in order to judge the credibility of those entering these claims and their alleged authority to

⁵ Walker 1998:221.

⁶ See Margaret Urban Walker, 2002, “Morality in practice: A response to Claudia Card and Lorraine Code,” *Hypatia* 17 (1), p180.

⁷ I borrow this useful term from Heidi Grasswick, “Individuals-in-Communities: the Search for a Feminist Model of Epistemic Subjects,” *Hypatia*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 85-120, summer 2004.

do so. Moreover, women have to make these credibility judgments from positions of gender inequality, since dominant interpretations of the Catholic worldview explicitly exclude women from equal participation in moral knowledge making.

Members of the Church hierarchy commend the teaching about birth control as objective—as having moral authority for Catholics and not simply reflecting the biases or preferences of the hierarchy, who enjoy epistemic authority and other forms of privilege. For Catholics, a teaching is morally authoritative to the extent that it expresses the Gospel message. There are several mechanisms and instruments of moral reasoning within this community that collectively are supposed to generate trustworthy moral outcomes including: (1) scripture, (2) the tradition of the church embodied in papal encyclicals, and (3) the role of the Magisterium (the Church hierarchy) who are supposed to have epistemic authority on matters of faith and morals. Women are formally blocked from these positions of epistemic authority because they are formally blocked from becoming priests. Though members of the Magisterium are believed to have privileged epistemic authority in matters of faith and morals, their authority is not absolute. Their authority is checked by a number of factors, most importantly what is known as (4) the sense of the faithful. The sense of the faithful refers to the idea that the laity collectively has a spiritual instinct about what is and is not in harmony with the Gospel message.⁸ Serious discord between the sense of the faithful and Magisterial proclamations indicates that God’s revealed message is likely not fully understood with respect to the issue in question.⁹

In order to make the Catholic hierarchy’s position on birth control transparent, we judge shared understandings within this community about how reliable moral teachings are supposed to be established, against how the birth control teachings have *in fact* been established. During Vatican II, the Magisterium decided to re-asses Church doctrine about the morality of artificial contraception. Pope John XXIII called a commission consisting of both clergy and laity, including for the first time some women, to review church teaching on contraception. There was nearly unanimous agreement among those on the commission that the official Church position on contraception was seriously flawed and needed to be revisited. The commission found that a literalist interpretation of scripture, which the Church had for many years now rejected, had been used to support this teaching. They also found certain natural law arguments used in prior documents to defend this teaching unsound.¹⁰ Moreover, the commission concluded the existence of significant discord between what the church was teaching and the sense of the faithful.¹¹ Testimony, especially from Catholic women around the globe, revealed serious

⁸ Richard Gaillardetz,, 2003, *By What Authority?: A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium and the Sense of the Faithful*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, p109.

⁹ Gaillardetz 111.

¹⁰ For example, Thomas Roberts, the Archbishop of Bombay, India, publicly challenged the Magisterium to defend its teaching on artificial contraception as arguments given based on natural law clearly fail. “On the grounds of reason alone, one can conceive of many cases in which a husband and wife might, after having examined their consciences, decide that contraception was the only means for preserving the health of one or the other spouse, or for preserving the marriage itself” See Robert McClory, 1995, *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, and How Humanae Vitae Changed the Life of Patty Crowley and the Future of the Church*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, p51.

¹¹ For details about findings regarding the sense of the faithful see McClory 1995 and 2000, *Faithful Dissenters:*

misgivings.¹² The commission agreed to submit only one report to the Council, so it looked as if it would recommend that the Church seriously revisit its position on birth control.¹³ Before this happened, however, the three opposing bishops on the commission secretly drafted and leaked a “minority” report stating that, “any change was inconceivable.”¹⁴ And in the end the Pope simply ignored the commission’s report and maintained the Church’s traditional teaching.¹⁵ The Magisterium continue to condemn birth control on the grounds that this teaching reflects the gospel message as it is revealed in scripture, tradition, and the sense of the faithful. Yet when we make this teaching transparent, looking “through intervening media,” we see that a significant lynchpin holding it in place is a flagrant abuse of power, a violation of the community’s own shared understandings about how reliable moral knowledge is produced.¹⁶ This teaching is not trustworthy for all who are supposed to share in it.

Using mutually recognizable moral terms, such as appeals to the sense of the faithful and scripture, many Catholic women (and men) challenge the trustworthiness of this teaching by challenging the credibility and authority of those who enter these claims, even from positions of relative inequality. This is crucially important, because many Catholic women seek moral solutions from within their faith tradition. However, certain broader social and economic conditions also played a role. For example, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and especially the Women’s movement, influenced getting women on the commission, getting a greater hearing for their testimony, and inspiring many women for the first time to publicly speak up. Certain economic and pragmatic considerations also influenced the realization, not only of many women faithful, but also of many Bishops and clergy, that this teaching is problematic. Extreme poverty connected to the rise of neo-liberal economic policies, was affecting large numbers of Catholic women in the global south making it practically impossible to support large families. Moreover, a rise in the spread of diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, had rendered Church teaching on birth control literally deadly for thousands of women and children.

Foregrounding the connection between trust and objectivity also helps us better understand some of the difficulties in cross-border moral discourse between dramatically different forms of life, where there may not yet be shared moral terms or styles of reasoning. For example, another case study I am working on involves Maasai women (Rift valley areas of Kenya) who contest critical interventions by Western feminists regarding the moral status of practices of FGC. The resistance of Maasai women to the moral conclusions reached by Western feminists can be

Stories of Men and Women Who Loved and Changed the Church, (New York: Maryknoll Press). See also, John T Noonan, 1986, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

¹² To provide a flavor of the testimony the commission heard, consider the words of one Catholic mother: “If I am married to a man who might find it difficult to save for the children’s education and buy five pairs of shoes at one time...the rhythm method might be justified. Ha! We memorized that book in our first year of married life. We use it now to replace a lost caster on the baby’s crib... I am the one surrounded by wild, scrappy, noisy, dirty little boys, carrying a runny-nosed baby. Vomiting at intervals with my next pregnancy; overwhelmed with the noise, dirt, spilled food, overflowing diaper pails, broken furniture, and unpaid bills” (McClory 1995:52).

¹³ Gary Wills, 2000, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, New York: Doubleday, p93.

¹⁴ Wills 94.

¹⁵ Pope Paul VI made this decision as John XXIII had died and Paul was his successor.

¹⁶ Wills 79.

understood as failures of trust. Maasai women often make credibility judgments that these “outsider” critics lack moral competence because they make moral judgments without an adequate understanding of the practices or the people they scrutinize; moreover, histories of colonization and current practices of globalization raise questions about integrity of Western feminists, however well-intentioned, given the history of interventions in Maasai life that have had devastating consequences, especially for Maasai women. In order to reason well with others across the borders of colonial histories, culture, and race trust has to be forged. We need to explore how to do this.