Thinking Functionally About Moral Assertion

1. Introduction

Much has been said in the preceding few decades about the nature and normativity of assertion. Recently, some philosophers have turned their attention to specifically moral assertions, and argued that they are subject to an especially strong norm – a norm according to which speakers ought to ensure that their moral assertions are accompanied by explanations (Simion 2018; Kelp 2020). Arguments for this view, which (for reasons to be explained in the next section) I'll call the 'E-Functional Account' of moral assertion, are motivated by the same examples that animate much of the recent literature on moral testimony. However, rather than supporting a view about how we should respond as addressees of such testimony, proponents of the E-Functional Account take these examples to support a view about how we should behave as speakers.

The view that we should not make moral assertions without also providing an accompanying explanation has been challenged. That challenge, however, has not gone far enough. In this article, I'll show that the theoretical commitment that underwrites the strong, explanation-proffering norm of moral assertion is itself open to challenge. That commitment is to the view that moral assertion is a kind of action that has a distinctive, evolutionary advantage – namely, that it helps to produce moral understanding in hearers. Here, I'll challenge that commitment, as well as the prescriptive norms that it is taken to support.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I provide the background necessary to situate the E-Functional Account of Moral Assertion, showing that it is a specific (and particularly strong) articulation of a more general thesis that has recently gained popularity – the so-called Asymmetry Thesis. Section 3 explains the concept and theoretical significance of *e-functions*, particularly as they've

been recruited to think about assertion. Section 4 defends Max Lewis's (2020) objection to the prescriptive norms posited by proponents of the E-Functional Account. It also gives reasons for thinking that Lewis's treatment of the Account does not go far enough, by arguing that its central, motivating thesis—that moral assertion has the e-function of increasing moral understanding—is open to challenge. In Section 5, I give an analysis of a particular sub-class of moral assertions, which I call Emotionally Forceful Moral Assertions (EFMAs). I argue that EFMAs provide a counterexample to this central thesis. The view defended is that moral assertion can be understood as functioning to transmit knowledge and that it is, is in this sense, continuous with ordinary assertion.

2. The Asymmetry Thesis

In recent years, many philosophers have endorsed the idea that, when it comes to moral matters, our epistemic goal is not moral knowledge, but the more sophisticated epistemic good of moral understanding (Zagzebski 2001; Nickel 2001; Hills 2009; Callahan 2018; Howard 2018; Simion 2018; Kelp 2020; Croce 2020; Sliwa 2017). There are a variety of accounts of what, exactly, moral understanding amounts to. Some philosophers argue that moral understanding is a kind of cognitive skill that one need not have in order to have moral knowledge. On the view popularized by Allison Hills (2009), for instance, one has moral understanding when they know x and know that y is why x, and they can see the connection between x and y, in a spontaneous way characterized in terms of "grasping." This skill means that agents with moral understanding are in a position to gain moral knowledge, on their own, in a variety of subtly distinct situations — that they are appropriately responsive to the reasons in virtue of which the moral facts obtain. In contrast, others argue that moral understanding is attained whenever one has sufficient moral knowledge (e.g., Sliwa 2017; Croce 2020). The agent who understands the wrongness of factory farming, for instance, has

knowledge of the various ways in which factory farming could be cruel and therefore wrong, and

knows which of these ways obtain (Sliwa 2017).

Although there are some differences in opinion about why moral understanding matters, there is a

broad consensus that moral understanding is more valuable than moral knowledge. For instance, a

great many philosophers also think that, if agents are to achieve some essential part of what morality

demands of us, moral understanding is required.[1] For some people, this latter point is cashed out in

terms of moral understanding's enabling agents to act with moral worth (Hills 2009; Nickel 2001).

Others philosophers eschew talk of moral worth, and instead emphasize the affective and conative

dimensions of moral understanding (Callahan 2018; Howard 2018). These philosophers frame the

importance of moral understanding in terms of its ensuring that agents have the appropriate moral

emotions and desires (cf. Fletcher 2016). Whichever view one adopts, however, the basic idea is that

morality demands that people have, or at the very least strive for, moral understanding.

This basic idea is taken to establish a difference between our epistemological practices with respect

to moral and non-moral matters (cf. Groll and Decker 2014).[2] Call this view the *Asymmetry Thesis.* To

see the attraction of the Asymmetry Thesis, consider the following example. Having just looked at

my phone's weather app, I know that tomorrow is likely to be cloudy with a chance of showers. I

know this but have nothing close to what can be reasonably thought of as meteorological

understanding. I base my belief on the credibility of meteorologists and have very little knowledge

about why the weather is likely to be like this, and am also insensitive to the features in virtue of

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[1] Sliwa (2016) is one exception here.
[2] Strictly speaking, the asymmetry may not be between the moral domain and *all* non-moral domains, as some people think that our epistemic goal in the aesthetic domain is like our goal in the moral domain. See Ransom (2019), Nguyen (2019) and Hills (2020).

which this is the case. Yet there seems to be nothing inappropriate about my epistemic standing with respect to this fact (unless, of course, I purport to be a meteorologist.) In other words, there is no sense in which I ought to be dissatisfied with merely knowing this fact, and no expectation that I try to gain understanding of it. That things are different, in the moral domain, is usually motivated by consideration of a particular kind of testimonial exchange. Consider the following case:

> **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 asks 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: 94)

In contrast to **Vegetarian**, consider the following:

> **Train:** It's 10.15am, and Eleanor is still waiting for the 10am commuter train.
> She starts to worry that perhaps she misread the timetable. Seeing a man come
> down onto the platform, she approaches him and asks if he knows what time
> the next train is. He tells her that the 10am train has been delayed, but that it's
> expected to arrive in 5min. Thinking that the man looks trustworthy and has no
> reason to deceive her, Eleanor comes to believe that the train will arrive in
> 5mins.

The exchange in **Train** should strike us as perfectly normal. In contrast, there is a broad consensus that when we read about cases like **Vegetarian,** we feel that something inappropriate has happened. Most philosophers think that this intuition tracks the fact that Eleanor responds inappropriately to her informant. Accordingly, cases like **Vegetarian** tend to be taken to show us something about how we ought to respond to moral assertions like, "*x* is wrong" — assertions that are couched in so-called "thin" moral terms which have no (or minimal) descriptive content (see Fletcher 2016: p. 48). Many conclude that, other things being equal, agents should not defer to moral testimony (see Nickel 2001; Hills 2009; Howell 2014; Callahan 2018). Call this the No Deference Norm (henceforth NDN). No such norm holds outside of the moral domain, and this is why there is nothing wrong with Eleanor's deference in **Train.**

Recently, proponents of the Asymmetry Thesis, Mona Simion (2018) and Christoph Kelp (2020), have taken cases like **Vegetarian** to support a strong norm of moral assertion. Rather than thinking that Eleanor has responded inappropriately, these philosophers suggest that Eleanor's informant has done something wrong. While Simion and Kelp argue for slightly different norms, both maintain that moral assertions must (at least) be accompanied by an explanation.[3] Call this the Explanation Requirement on Moral Assertion (ERMA). According to the Requirement, explanation-giving is a necessary condition of appropriate moral assertion. If the Requirement holds, then the difference between cases like **Vegetarian** and **Train** could be explained by the fact that, in the former case, the speaker has done something epistemically wrong – Eleanor's informant should have told her why eating meat is morally wrong.

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[3] Simion (2018) argues for a norm according to which speakers must ensure they accompany their moral assertions with an explanation. Kelp goes further, insisting that speakers must have moral understanding, in addition to offering explanations (see Kelp 2020, pp 644-645). Both agree, then, that explanation-giving is a necessary condition of appropriate moral assertion, although only Simion thinks it is also sufficient.

While both ERMA and NDN are consistent with the Asymmetry Thesis, advocates of ERMA are committed to more than just the claim that we have different epistemic goals in the moral and non-moral domains. Proponents of ERMA argue that the *etiological function* (or e-function, for short) of moral assertion is the generation, in the hearer, of moral understanding.

3. E-Functions and (Moral) Assertion

To say that the e-function of moral assertion is the generation of moral understanding is to say that the generation of moral understanding is the benefit that was achieved by past moral assertions, and which explains why the practice of making moral assertions persists. Call this the *E-Functional Account* of moral assertion. The E-Functional Account can be understood as a particular interpretation of the Asymmetry Thesis. The Thesis holds that, when we communicate about moral matters, we are after moral understanding; when we make assertions about matters in other domains, mere knowledge is sufficient. The E-Functional Account agrees, and then focuses on particular aspect of moral communication— namely, the making of moral assertions. Moreover, the E-Functional Account is committed to a particular causal story about the evolution of moral assertion.

The concept of an e-function has its most natural home in the philosophy of biology and teleosemantics. For instance, the e-function of the heart's mechanism is to pump blood. By pumping blood, the heart accrues certain benefits to the system in which it is embedded (namely, the human body). That the heart produces these benefits, moreover, helps to explain why the pumping mechanism persists. Importantly, persistence of a type (i.e., the heart's beating mechanism) doesn't require that tokens of that type always achieve their e-function. To see this, consider the plausible claim that the eyeblink reflex has the e-function of protecting the retina (see Millikan 2007: 364).

Clearly, this reflex does not always fulfill that function. For every time the eyeblink reflex protects the retina, it is exercised many more times without accruing any benefit to the eye. It is sufficient, however, for retina-protection to count as the eyeblink reflex's e-function, that the benefit of a protected retina is what explains the persistence of the reflex.

Approaching intentional human acts with an eye toward their e-functions has been thought to have certain theoretical benefits. This is because, if some intentional action has an e-function, then there will be facts about what makes token performances of that action good tokens. These facts therefore inform an *evaluative norm* – a norm that enables us to discern whether a token is a good instance of the type. Again, consider a biological example. A token eyeblink will be a good eyeblink if, when it functions Normally (that is, in the same way in which the reflex functioned when it was selected for) and in Normal conditions (that is, in conditions that are as they were when the reflex was selected for), it is disposed to protect the retina. Consider a different example: a cup of espresso produced at a cafe (Kelp 2016: 8-11). Suppose these espressos have the e-function of producing a particular kind of pleasant gustatory experience in their consumers – after all, it is plausible to hold that the production of that experience is what explains why the coffee shop remains in the business of producing the espressos. A cup of espresso will therefore be a good espresso if it has the disposition to produce that pleasant experience in customers by functioning Normally (i.e., by stimulating their taste buds) in Normal conditions (i.e., when customers have properly-working tastebuds, when the air is sufficiently clean, and when customers drink the espresso rather than snorting it etc.). This means that an espresso can still be a good espresso even if it does not actually fulfil its e-function. That is, an espresso that is forgotten on the café counter can still be a good espresso, so long as it would stimulate the customers' tastebuds to produce the pleasant experience were conditions Normal (that is, were a customer to drink it).

Consider an example of a simple human action, like the act of asserting. Suppose, as is plausible, that the e-function of making an ordinary (i.e., non-moral) assertion is the generation of knowledge in the addressee. If this is true, then an assertion will be good if it is disposed to produce knowledge in addressees, provided things are Normal. This means that purported counterexamples to the popular Knowledge Norm of Assertion, like the one below, will describe evaluatively good assertions:

> **Creationist Teacher.** Stella is a teacher who, whilst herself being a creationist, recognizes that the scientific evidence strongly supports evolutionary theory. Since she takes it to be her duty as a teacher to present the view that is supported by scientific evidence, she asserts to her students various truths of evolutionary theory, including that modern-day Homo sapiens evolved from Homo erectus.
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> (Lackey 2007: 599)

If the e-function of assertion is the generation of knowledge, in the addressee(s), then Stella's assertion is (evaluatively) good.

However, evaluative norms should not be confused with prescriptive norms – norms that are intended to guide human conduct by making violators legitimate targets of criticism. These norms emerge so as to ensure that e-functions are achieved as reliably as possible. With respect to assertion, then, asserting from knowledge is supposed to be a way of asserting that is more reliably likely to enable knowledge in the addressee than is asserting from, say, unjustified beliefs or wishes.

By drawing a distinction between evaluative and prescriptive norms, the E-Functional Account can uphold the popular Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA) while also accepting that cases like **Creationist Teacher** describe (evaluatively) good assertions. Stella's assertion is evaluatively good,

the thought goes, although she violates KNA, the prescriptive norm of assertion according to which speakers should only assert what they know. This explains why, if Stella's students discovered that she doesn't believe in evolutionary theory, they'd be prima facie justified in criticizing her. That e-functional thinking can accommodate purported examples to KNA is supposed to be one of its chief virtues.

Advocates of the E-Functional Account argue that, in cases like **Vegetarian**, the speaker violates ERMA, where the rationale for ERMA is given by the fact that the e-function of moral assertion is moral understanding, as opposed to moral knowledge. The underlying idea is that, by criticizing agents when their moral assertions aren't accompanied by explanations, most speakers will provide explanations along with their moral assertions (see Simion 2018).[4] This, in turn, will ensure that moral assertions achieve their e-function reliably enough to continue to persist.

The E-Functional Account, and the ERMA that it's taken to support, are prima facie plausible. In addition to explaining intuitions about cases like **Vegetarian**, ERMA would explain the observation that we don't often trust moral assertions unless they are accompanied by an explanation. As Christoph Kelp (2020: 643-644), has observed, "we would typically not expect hearers to respond to your assertion that it is immoral to patronise the local public with belief; not unless you offer some reason why this is so." Despite its prima facie plausibility, however, the E-Functional Account faces serious challenges.

4. Problems with the E-Functional Account

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[4] Note that Kelp endorses a slightly different account of how the norm of moral assertion is fixed. See Kelp (2020: pp.645-646). For my purpose, the rationale from Simion will suffice.

First, note that in some cases, ERMA delivers the wrong judgments about speakers. Consider the following case, from Lewis (2019):

> **Antebellum:** Michael is the son of a slave owner in the Antebellum south of the
> United States. He has lived on the same estate as slaves his entire life. Now 21,
> Michael's long-lived doubts about the morality of slavery have come to a head and he
> now knows that slavery is wrong and he also grasps why. During an argument with
> father, he says, "How could you be so blind? Slavery is clearly wrong!"
> (Lewis 2019: 1047)

If ERMA is right, then Michael's assertion makes him a legitimate target of criticism. But this seems wrong. So, ERMA must not be right.

Kelp doesn't agree that **Antebellum** is a counterexample to ERMA. He says that Michael's assertion, "Slavery is clearly wrong!" is actually an explained moral assertion: "There can be no question," says Kelp (2020: 648), "that what [Michael] means is that it is clearly wrong for the reasons present at their context." According to Kelp, then, Michael's assertion is explained by the features present at the context of utterance.

Certainly, what Michael says is true in virtue of the nature of slavery and, given where the exchange takes place, his assertion is made true by features of the conversational context. However, it does not follow from this that Michael has explained his assertion, or even that he (falsely) believed that he was doing so. Perhaps what Kelp has in mind here is that Michael's father is in a position to look around him and see why Michael believes that slavery is wrong. However, nothing about the

example makes this obvious. It is possible, moreover, that Michael's father really does not see how the context makes the assertion true, and that he does not know why Michael believes that it does. Michael might know this, too. He might know, in other words, that his father has so thoroughly imbibed white supremacist ideology that he cannot see the context for what it is. When Michael asks "How could you be so blind?" he may be conveying to his father that the explanation for his belief is given by the context, while also expressing frustration that his father cannot simply consult that context and access that explanation.[5] If this were the case, it is hard to see why we should insist that Michael's utterance should be construed as an explained moral assertion, or even as an assertion that Michael (falsely) took himself to have explained And yet, his assertion still seems appropriate.

I think Lewis is right, then, that ERMA cannot hold. Lewis agrees, however, that the e-function of moral assertion is the generation of moral understanding in the addressee. In other words, he embraces key aspects of the E-Functional Account. Rather than endorsing ERMA, Lewis offers an alternative norm, which he calls the Understanding Norm of Moral Assertion (UNMA). According to UNMA, for a moral assertion to be appropriate: "First, one must have some cognitive or conative/affective *appreciation* of why one's assertion is true... Second, one must be able to share part of one's appreciation with one's audience—if prompted by them" (Lewis 2019: 1048.)[6] The idea, then, is that Michael's assertion is appropriate because he appreciates why slavery is wrong, and would be able to say more to his father, if prompted, to share part of that appreciation with him.

Insofar as it makes the right verdict about **Antebellum**, UNMA is an improvement on ERMA. Nonetheless, we should be cautious about accepting UNMA, so long as it is wedded to the E-

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[5] Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.
[6] See also Lewis (2020: 9).

Functional Account of Moral Assertion – the view according to which moral assertion functions to produce moral understanding. That's because we should be cautious about accepting too quickly that the e-function of moral assertion is the generation, in the hearer, of moral understanding. As already indicated, proponents of the E-Functional Account—like advocates of the Asymmetry Thesis more broadly—take it that our ultimate epistemic goal, when it comes to moral matters, is moral understanding. Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that this is true. Note though, that it would not necessarily follow from this fact, that the generation of moral understanding is the e-function of moral assertion To see this, start by noting that, when it comes to moral matters, our epistemic practices are strikingly diverse. They include, to name just a few: asking questions, considering hypotheticals, making moral assertions to close friends; making moral assertions to anonymous masses (say on Twitter, at a protest, in front of a large moral philosophy lecture); reading ethics textbooks; reading literature; and having playful conversations with people who disagree with us. From the fact that these various practices are all oriented toward the ultimate goal of attaining moral understanding, it does not follow that the e-function of each or any of these practices is the production of moral understanding – moral understanding may well be a higher-order goal, but any of these practices may well have some other, lower-order goal, that takes us only part of the way towards moral understanding. If we assume otherwise, then we could risk obscuring more proximal benefits that might better explain the persistence of those practices, and which might inform a more useful way of evaluating token performances and the agents responsible for them.

To get a better grip on the nature of this risk, an analogy will help. In a game of soccer, a particular strategy might be reliably successful at getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box. Because of this, it is a strategy that soccer coaches continue to teach, because by getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box, the strategy improves the team's chances of scoring a goal. However, from the

fact that the play takes the team a little bit closer to scoring, it does not follow that *scoring* is the e-function of the strategy. Why? Well, the reason the strategy is consistently taught and executed is that it is reliable way of getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box, *whether or not* the team then proceeds to score. Getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box, then, is the benefit that the strategy achieves, and it is sufficient to explain why the strategy continues to get taught by soccer coaches and executed on the ground, whether or not a team is capable of proceeding to score. Of course, a complete explanation of the strategy may reasonably cite both the e-function of getting the ball out of the goal box, *and* the ultimate, or higher-order goal, of scoring – it is in virtue of this higher-order goal, after all, that getting the ball out of the goal box is valuable to begin with. Nonetheless, to insist that the e-function of the play is to enable the team to score, when it is really the more proximal benefit of getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box that explains why the strategy persists, would be like insisting that the e-function of the eye's blinking mechanism or heart's pumping is to keep the human alive, as opposed to protecting the retina or circulating blood. When used in this way, the concept of e-function becomes significantly less useful. If, for instance, we insisted that scoring was the e-function of the strategy, then we would be left with an unhelpful criterion for evaluating any particular execution of the strategy; if it were perfectly executed and succeeded in getting the ball out of the goal box, but the team didn't proceed to score, what should we say about whether or not the strategy's execution would have disposed the team to score if it had proceeded in Normal conditions? Can we really hope to specify which conditions are Normal, so as to furnish a useful criterion? It is not clear that we can.[7] If, however, we say that the e-function of

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[7] It might be tempting to think that disposing the team to score is just a matter of increasing the likelihood that they score and that, therefore, the play did dispose the team to score, and so counts as an evaluatively good performance. But what if the impossibility of the team's scoring were a foregone conclusion, perhaps because the skill and size of the opponent's goalie makes scoring impossible? If that were the case, then nothing that the team could do at the opposite end of the field could improve their chances of scoring, and so the play wouldn't dispose the team to score no matter how well it was executed. But then we would have to say that the execution was not (evaluatively) good, despite being a perfect performance of the strategy. That seems wrong. Perhaps this verdict can be avoided, by insisting that such a foregone conclusion isn't consistent with Normal conditions — conditions in which the strategy was developed. This,

the play is "getting the ball out of the opponent's goal box", then the task of specifying an evaluative norm becomes tractable.

What this means is that if some practice is embedded in a more complicated set of practices that are oriented around some ultimate, higher-order goal, we should not assume that the e-function of the lower-order practice is the achievement of that ultimate goal. There might be some other, more proximal benefit that can explain the persistence of the practice and which, when compared to the ultimate goal, can inform a more useful criterion for evaluating token performances. In the next section, I will argue that there is at least one sub-class of moral assertions the persistence of which cannot be explained by reference to the generation of moral understanding, but which can be explained with reference to the production of another, more proximal benefit. Accordingly, this kind of moral assertion gives us reason to resist the claim that moral assertions have the e-function of generating moral understanding in hearers.

5. Emotionally Forceful Moral Assertions

In this section, I'm going to try to undermine the E-Functional Account more directly, by homing in on a familiar kind of moral assertion that is 1) unexplained, but does not make speakers legitimate targets of criticism, and 2) cannot be illuminated by the E-Functional Account, because it cannot be construed as having the e-function of producing or increasing moral understanding in hearers.[8] What I want to suggest is that this kind of assertion can be understood as akin to the soccer play

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however, seems ad hoc — why think the strategy wouldn't have still been developed in even such unequal circumstances?

[8] Note that here, I have identified the E-Functional Account with the view according to which the e-function of moral assertion is the generation in the hearer of moral understanding, as opposed to the view according to which moral assertions are to be individuated with respect to their e-function, whatever that may be (see p. 6). It does not follow, then, from the fact that I deny the E-Functional Account of Moral Assertion, that I also deny that some other e-function might not individuate moral assertions.

that succeeds in getting the ball out of the opposing team's goal box – it achieves a genuine benefit that is sufficient to explain its persistence, irrespective of whether or not it leads to the ultimate goal, which in the case of moral assertion may well be the production of moral understanding. If I am right, then we have reason to reject the claim that moral assertion, as such, has the e-function of producing moral understanding – moral understanding might be what we are ultimately after when it comes to moral matters, but not all moral assertions persist because they generate understanding in addressees.

I've already described one example of the sort of moral assertion I have in mind: **Antebellum**. Here's another:

> **Newspaper:** You are reading a news article about a refugee crisis at the U.S./Mexico border, that describes a series of massive protests that have erupted at a detention facility over the U.S. Government's detainment of children. Your sister walks in and sees you reading the article. She says that she doesn't see why people are so upset – it's not such a big deal to detain border-crossers, she says, given that they have broken the law. You're alarmed by her comment, as you strongly believe that what's happening at the border is wrong and have found yourself deeply troubled by it in the preceding weeks. You respond to her by saying, "What? What they're doing at the border is wrong!"

Newspaper has three important features in common with **Antebellum.** First, the speaker does not seem to be a legitimate target of criticism. Second, it describes an exchange between people who have a personal relationship with each other and who, we should assume, share a baseline of mutual

respect. Third, the speakers' moral assertion is made with emotional force. As such, the utterance doesn't just convey the speaker's cognitive attitude about the topic under discussion, it also conveys their affective and conative attitudes. Importantly, insofar as they convey the speakers' strongly held cognitive attitudes, the utterances described in **Newspaper** and **Antebellum** are not mere expressives. We can stipulate, in fact, that in both cases the speaker's utterance conveys one of the speaker's most strongly held moral beliefs.

With respect to the way it is delivered, then, the assertion in **Newspaper** is quite different from non-moral descriptive assertions, which typically convey only belief. For instance, when a stranger asks me what time it is and I respond by asserting, "it's 2pm," my assertion conveys only information about the time. In **Newspaper**, however, you convey your affective and conative attitudes towards the situation at the border because (as your tone of voice and gestures will almost certainly make clear) you *care* not only about that situation but also, as a consequence, your sister's perspective on it too. To say that you care about the situation at the border is just to say that you have a set of cognitive, affective and conative dispositions towards that situation, such that you do not merely believe that what is happen is morally wrong, but are motivated by that belief, and also perceptually attuned to considerations connected to the situation that, for you, are reasons for action (see Jaworska 2007; Sripada 2016; Seidman 2016). On this view, cares are complex attitudes that plausibly specify what is "genuinely important to the person" (Sripada 2016, 1211) and so individuate that person's fundamental practical stance or identity.

For simplicity, I'll refer to these as *Emotionally Forceful Moral Assertions* (henceforth EFMAs). Not all moral assertions are EFMAs. In philosophy classrooms and even sometimes in our personal lives, moral assertions are made without emotional force. This should be no surprise. After all, we are

capable of cognitively registering moral facts without really having the affective and conative attitudes requisite for really caring about them (Stocker 1979; Svavarsdottir 1999; cf. Smith 1994). For instance, I am cognitively committed to the idea that eating meat is wrong, but I have never (unfortunately) found myself affectively or conatively moved by this fact. On the other hand, I believe that the persistence of solitary confinement is wrong, and am affectively and conatively moved by that fact – it is something I care deeply about. Moreover, even when we do care about certain moral issues and facts, the affective and conative attitudes associated with those cares aren't experienced 24/7, and so not all our associated moral speech is made with emotional force (Jaworska 2007). Indeed, there are conversational contexts in which, even when we care deeply about something, it is simply neither required nor appropriate to express the strength of our attitudes.

EFMAs make manifest, or show (see Green 2007), the speaker's own moral cares and, consequently, their own practical perspective (Sripada 2016). When one is the addressee of this sort of assertion, then, there is little doubt that the speaker cares about the object of her assertion – that the moral wrong at issue is not something she is only cognitively committed to, but is also something she cares about deeply, and expects others to recognize as important too. Because of this, EFMAs—when made by people we deeply respect[9]—wield a distinctive power. Suppose, for instance, that the assertion in **Newspaper** succeeds at getting your sister to change her mind about the situation at the border. If this were true, it would be difficult to deny that this was explained, at least in part, by the fact that 1) the assertion conveys information about what the speaker cares about and 2) the speaker is someone that the addressee respects. Your assertion—precisely because it is expressive of *your* moral perspective—is capable of bringing about a distinctive sort of response is your sister. For one

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[9] This is, I think, most plausibly construed as a kind of "appraisal respect" (Darwall 1977).

thing, it is capable of giving your sister a reason to believe she might be mistaken. To see how it can do this, Miranda Fricker's (2016) discussion of *prolepsis* is helpful. The concept of prolepsis is one Fricker takes from Bernard Williams (1995). On Fricker's telling, 'prolepsis' names the means by which communicative blame (second-personal blame that is made with emotional force) succeeds in sharing practical reasons. As Fricker says:

> Exploiting the envisaged proleptic mechanism involves treating the blamed party as
> if they recognised the motivating reason when in fact they didn't (or at least they
> failed to give it appropriate deliberative priority). Treating them in this *as if* manner
> stands to gain some psychological traction in the as yet recalcitrant wrongdoer,
> *provided that they possess a more general motive to be the sort of person that you respect*.
> (Fricker 2016: 12)

In the case of communicative blame, then, the blamer's reprimand moves the blamed party to try to consider the circumstances from the blamer's perspective, precisely because the person that is blamed respects the person that is blaming, and cares that the blamer continues to respect them. In **Newspaper**, your assertion expresses your view of the moral reasons at play, as well as your expectation that your sister also recognizes those reasons. Provided your sister respects you, and cares about retaining your respect, your EFMA can move her to reconsider her beliefs. Importantly, however, we need not imagine that this means gaining moral understanding, even if it is true that moral understanding comes in degrees. That's because of the kind of epistemic reason your assertion gives your sister. Your assertion will enable her to possess the reason for belief that is given by the consideration that *someone she respects cares deeply about the issue under discussion, and strongly believes that it is*

wrong.[10] This consideration gives her a reason to believe that the situation at the border is wrong. Moreover, insofar as the addressee's respect for the speaker is responsive to the right kind of reasons (i.e., her perception of the speaker as a competent responder to reasons), this belief can amount to knowledge. In other words, we should not assume that the threat of losing the speaker's esteem undercuts or subverts the proper functioning of the addressee's reason-responsiveness. Rather, that prospect can provide the hearer with a reason *because* the hearer respects the speaker's capacity to recognize reasons. Forming a belief on this basis, the addressee need not know what features of the situation at the border provide the reasons that the speaker recognizes, let alone be able to grasp how those reasons support the truth of the assertion. To return to **Newspaper**, if your sister doesn't know which features of the situation at the border provide reasons to support the truth of the assertion, and if she has no ability to grasp how those reasons support the truth of her new belief, then we cannot say that she has gained even limited moral understanding.[11] The same holds of the EFMA depicted in **Antebellum**. In both cases, the basis for belief gained by the addressee undermines the claim that they have gained (even limited) moral understanding.

It is not the production of increased moral understanding, then, that is the function of the proleptic mechanism. Rather, it is the transmission of moral knowledge. In support of this, note that even if the addressee does not go forth and gain moral understanding, that fact does not mean that the EFMA was not an evaluatively *good* moral assertion; it is, after all, an assertion that has enabled

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[10] Of course, just as communicative blame often invites expressions of counter-blame, justification and excuse, the result of an EFMA may well be that the addressee will come back with their own EFMA, thus leading to a back-and-forth that may alter the reasons possessed by the original speaker, original addressee, or both.

[11] Proponents of the E-Functional Account may counter that it is improper to form moral beliefs without moral understanding. However, I take it that such a position would require some arguing for. In my view, it can be appropriate to form moral beliefs before having moral understanding, and that it is appropriate to do so, for instance, in response to the EFMA of someone we respect. Thank you to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

moral knowledge, and so enabled right action.[12] This is a benefit sufficient to explain the persistence of the practice of making EFMAs. We might think of it as akin to the way, in the aesthetic domain, a poetry lover can convince her friends that poetry is a source of real aesthetic value, simply in virtue of the way they display their own passion when talking about poetry – even when, previously, those friends had been sceptical about the value of poetry.

 Of course, EFMAs may also secure other benefits. For instance, they might help maintain a relationship of mutual respect between speaker and hearer (c.f. McShane 2018). Moreover, prolepsis may well motivate the hearer to try to bring her perspective into even closer alignment with the speaker's. We might want to describe the latter motivation, of course, as a motivation to gain moral understanding. Importantly, though, the hearer's actions will not yet be motivated by the features of the situation in virtue of which what is happening is, say, morally wrong.[13] As such, she is not yet motivated in the way that an agent with (even limited) moral understanding would be motivated. In the case of **Newspaper**, the hearer will, instead, be motivated by the desire to see what the speaker sees, so to speak.

Rather than insist that the function of EFMAs is the generation, in the hearer, of moral understanding, we ought to say that the function is to transmit moral knowledge.[14] What does this

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[12] In saying this is a moral-epistemic benefit, I side with Sliwa (2016) and Johnson King (2020a; 2020b) in assuming that right action motivated by moral knowledge is sufficient for moral worth. On this point, some philosophers will disagree (see Arpaly 2002; Hills 2009; Markovits 2010).

[13] Here, it might help to say that the hearer has gained what Agnes Callard's (2018, 68-70) calls a "proleptic reason". If the hearer has gained a proleptic reason, then she is motivated by a desire to be the sort of person her friend respects, although she will also recognize that this desire is inadequate — she will recognize, in other words, that she ought to be motivated by the wrongness of the issue under discussion.

[14] It's worth saying that although my analysis draws an analogy between communicative blame and moral assertion, it does not follow that these moral assertions are best construed as instances of blame. Where communicative blame expresses fault-finding, EFMAs express the speaker's own view on the moral landscape, including their expectations about the attitudes of others. The latter does not quite amount to the former, although it certainly conveys evidence about what the speaker *would* find blameworthy/praiseworthy. Rather than construe certain moral assertions as instances of communicative blame, it is more appropriate to think of communicative blame as a kind of communication that takes

mean for the more general category of moral assertion? I have said that EFMAs are a familiar, common kind of moral assertion, and that they can be most clearly understood to have the function of generating moral knowledge, as opposed to moral understanding. Indeed, in focusing on EFMAs, I have been attempting to motivate a view that I think holds of all moral assertions – namely, that moral assertion, as such, has the function of enabling moral knowledge. If this is right, then moral assertion is just like ordinary assertion, except that the knowledge transmitted is distinctly moral knowledge.

But what about the observations that were supposed to motivate the E-Functional Account to begin with – observations that were supposed to support the idea that the function of moral assertion is more sophisticated than the function of ordinary assertion? I think my view can straightforwardly explain these observations. That is, it can explain our intuitions about cases like **Vegetarian**, as well as the observation that, in Kelp's (2020, 643) words, we don't "typically" trust moral assertions unless they are accompanied by an explanation. It is plausible, after all, that it is generally more difficult to discern whether someone is a credible *moral* informant—and so a source of moral knowledge—than it is to discern whether someone is credible with respect to other, non-moral matters. From the fact that one is generally reliable in a great deal of ordinary, everyday matters, it obviously doesn't follow that they are a good *moral* informant – moral knowledge is, after all, plausibly harder to come by then knowledge of, say, the time or the forecasted weather. Accordingly, although we might seem to be generally entitled to a default belief that strangers are credible informants about the time or weather, we do not seem to be similarly entitled to believe that strangers are good moral informants. However, one way for an unfamiliar prospective moral

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advantage, in an especially direct way, of the proleptic mechanism that a great deal of familiar moral communication can activate.

informant to give their hearer some reason to believe that they are reliable when it comes to moral matters, is by offering the hearer their reasons for moral belief. If, for instance, a stranger tells you that it is immoral to patronize the local pub because it is using child labor, then by offering you their reason for belief, that stranger demonstrates to you that they understand the sort of thing that would, if true, make it wrong to patronize the pub. In doing so, the speaker gives you a reason to believe that they have some moral sensitivity, and consequently gives you a reason to think they have some credibility with respect to moral matters. On this view, the explanation that the speaker offers is as a way of showing the hearer than the speaker is a credible moral informant, so as to make it reasonable to *believe* that informant, and, by extension, to make the transmission of moral knowledge possible. The idea would be, then, that when it comes to moral testimony, it is often hard to generate moral knowledge in a hearer without also displaying—and so making available—some moral understanding. However, from the fact that getting the former (moral knowledge) from testimony sometimes requires giving the latter (moral understanding), it does not follow that generating understanding is the goal, or e-function, of the assertion. Indeed, as I have argued in this section, one central and familiar way in which we transmit moral knowledge, via moral assertion, does not proceed in this way.

What, then, about **Vegetarian**? Recall that this is the kind of example that, in the literature on moral testimony, is supposed to motivate the No-Deference Norm (NDN). Like Sliwa (2012), however, I suspect that the appeal of NDN comes from contingent features of the examples, like **Vegetarian,** that are used to motivate it. If, for instance, we are told that Eleanor knows her friend to be reliable when it comes to questions about animal ethics, then I think the example would strike us as significantly less strange. The same would be true, I suggest, if Eleanor's friend was clearly depicted

as uttering an EFMA.[15] Indeed, if the example was altered in either of these two ways, not only would Eleanor's response strike us as appropriate, but it is fair to say that the intuitions motivating the insistance that Eleanor's friend has done something inappropriate would dissipate too.

6. Conclusion

Recent approaches to moral assertion have leveraged cases in which it seems inappropriate to defer to moral testimony, to conclusions about the sorts of norms that speakers are subject to when they make moral assertions – in particular, a norm according to which we need to explain our moral assertions (ERMA). I have argued that there are several problems with this line of argumentation. For one thing, this line of thinking fails to capture our intuitions about certain sorts of cases, like **Antebellum** and **Newspaper**. These are cases in which unexplained moral assertions seem perfectly appropriate. More deeply, though, the assumption on which the argument rests—that the e-function of moral assertion is the generation of moral understanding in the hearer—is open to challenge. Here, I've challenged that assumption by 1) homing in on a class of moral assertions which I've called Emotionally Forceful Moral Assertions, and 2) suggesting that the observations which motivate the assumption are susceptible to an alternative explanation. Accordingly, although the alternative norm that Max Lewis proposes, UNMA, appears to be capture some of the examples that ERMA cannot, is not enough to vindicate the E-Functional Account to which Lewis is wed – the account according to which moral assertion functions to increase moral understanding in the hearer, and is subject to prescriptive and evaluative norms derivable from that e-function.[16]

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[15] Note that rejecting NDN does not mean rejecting the Asymmetry Thesis, as it can remain the case that our ultimate epistemic goals in moral and non-moral domains differ. The view I defend is consistent with this kind of asymmetry.
[16] Recall that UNMA requires that "one must have some cognitive or conative/affective appreciation of why one's assertion is true" (Lewis 2019: 1048). In cases of EFMAs, of course, it seems insufficient that the speaker has *only* a cognitive grasp on why their assertion is true. In these cases, they ought to care deeply about the issue under discussion, and so must have a cognitive, conative and affective grasp. Accordingly, unless we interpret UNMA such that the moral understanding requisite for proper assertion entails caring about the issue under discussion (in other words (unless, that is, the disjunct in

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the first condition of UNMA becomes a conjunct), EFMAs will appear to be governed by a different, slightly stronger norm than UNMA.

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