



RESPONSE

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS ARE MORAL EXPERTS! A REPLY TO DAVID ARCHARD

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ABSTRACT

In his article ‘Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be Moral Experts’ David Archard attempts to show that his argument from common-sense morality is more convincing than other competing arguments in the debate. I examine his main line of argumentation and eventually refute his main argument in my reply.

INTRODUCTION

David Archard has recently published a readable article in *Bioethics* on the vital and perennial issue of whether moral philosophers are also moral experts.¹ I fully agree with his well-argued critique of the four proposed arguments in the ongoing debate about the vital claim that moral philosophers possess moral expertise, and his reasonable conclusion that the arguments are unpersuasive. However, I am less confident that his more sophisticated argument against this claim is indeed superior to and more persuasive than the other arguments. On the contrary, I will show that his proposed argument is both flawed and misleading.

The first section of this article briefly describes the main points Archard makes against the four proposed arguments in the debate, that is to say the idea of extreme disagreement among moral philosophers, the claim that moral expertise lacks any standards of identification, the objection that there is no expertise in non-objective matters, and the supposed unwillingness of non-experts to follow the experts’ advice. In the second section, Archard’s more sophisticated argument, that moral philosophers do not command a particular knowledge alien to non-philosophers, is examined and eventually refuted. The last section contains some final remarks.

¹ Archard, D. Why Moral Philosophers Are Not and Should Not Be Moral Experts. *Bioethics* 2011; 25(3): 119–127.

1. FOUR MISLEADING ARGUMENTS

Archard is correct in claiming that ‘expertise is exclusionary and restricted. It is the command of knowledge within a defined domain by some persons that is not commanded by others’, while expertise by definition is either propositional or performative.² Moral expertise, as Archard states, is propositional.³ The decisive difference between moral expertise and non-moral expertise concerns the distinction between descriptive and normative claims. For example, the professional claims made by the trained mechanic, the mountain guide, and the antiques expert are descriptive by nature and do not ‘display the same kind of controversial status’ that can be observed in the ‘substantive normative judgments’ of moral philosophers.⁴ The rest of this section briefly describes Archard’s sound critique of the four above-mentioned arguments against the vital claim that moral philosophers are not moral experts.

1.1. Moral philosophers do not possess moral expertise by virtue of their extreme disagreement

The first claim concerns the observation that moral experts radically disagree to such an extent that one could

² Ibid: 120.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid: 121.

question whether they are experts in the first place. Archard raises three objections to this claim. First, he rightly argues that extreme disagreement can also be found among experts in empirical sciences, for example, in debates between Bayesians and non-Bayesians on statistics or in evolutionary science between biologists and Darwinians. Secondly, even if the opponents claim that moral experts do not have a common basis for resolving a 'substantive normative disagreement' it does not follow, according to Archard, that moral philosophers do not share some basic common features such as consistency and the function of moral theory. Likewise, experts in other fields sometimes also disagree on 'higher order matters' concerning the 'fundamental theoretical commitments'. Thirdly, it is odd to claim that one cannot be an expert by virtue of the fact that one disagrees on subject matter; agreement among experts cannot be taken as a precondition of expertise.

1.2. Moral expertise lacks clear identification standards

The sceptic claims that the question of how do we know that he or she is a moral expert cannot be sufficiently well answered, in comparison with a similar question asked about other experts, for example, the trained mechanic and the mountain guide. Archard's response is twofold: first, he argues that moral philosophers like other experts are able to demonstrate a good academic reputation by appealing to certificates, degrees, professional bodies, and so on. Secondly, Archard acknowledges that the moral expert does not have 'evident and agreed [. . .] criteria for the solution of a problem in practical ethics';⁵ this is different from the car mechanic and the mountain guide. But, even against this background, so Archard says, it is possible to respond in a fairly reliable way to the claim of the (continuing) disagreement among moral experts and the related issue 'of which expert's advice to follow'; namely, 'on those grounds on which we pick out experts within a field as more expert than others'.⁶

1.3. There is no expertise in non-objective matters

According to the opponents, there cannot be expertise in non-objective matters, and since moral theory cannot claim to be objective by nature, there cannot be moral expertise. This argument is not persuasive to Archard since it is an open question as to whether moral theory is objective or not; and even if one concedes that moral

judgements are subjective, they still might be ranked according to whether they are (morally) better and worse.

1.4. The unwillingness of non-experts to follow the advice of moral experts

While, for example, the good advice of the mountain rescue team to abstain from climbing the mountain at a particular time and place might be willingly accepted by climbers, critics argue that this is different from the advice given by moral philosophers in, for example, end-of-life decision-making. People, it is argued, have strong moral views stemming from different sources, and are therefore hardly likely to accept the advice given by so-called moral experts. Archard objects that the argument is question-begging: recognition of expertise provides the non-expert with a good reason to follow his or her advice. As Archard rightly argues, non-recognition of moral expertise does not, indeed, suggest a lack of expertise. Non-experts might simply fail to appreciate the reasoning behind the advice.

It is fair to say that Archard convincingly refutes the arguments against the claim that moral philosophers are *not* moral experts.

2. THE ARGUMENT FROM COMMON-SENSE MORALITY

2.1 Depiction of the argument

In this section, I describe and examine Archard's common-sense argument in which he attempts to show that moral philosophers are not moral experts (or at least, only experts in a very limited sense). His argument runs as follows:⁷

- i. *Definition 1:* Moral expertise is a claim to command knowledge in the sense of making normative judgements not commanded by non-experts.
- ii. *Premise 1:* Moral philosophers construct moral theory on the basis of common-sense morality.
- iii. *Definition 2:* Common-sense morality is a set of moral maxims which non-experts have knowledge of and make use of in their daily lives.
- iv. *Assumption:* These moral maxims contain basic judgements about what is morally right and wrong.
- v. *Conclusion:* Moral philosophers cannot claim to be moral experts in the sense that they command a particular knowledge that is not commanded by others, since their moral expertise relies on common-sense morality that is commanded by all people.

In addition, he provides three claims in support of his main argument:

⁵ Ibid: 122.

⁶ Ibid: 123.

⁷ Ibid.

- i. *Moral theory is based in common-sense morality:* According to Archard, it might be the case that either: (a) non-experts might be more motivated to follow a moral theory, if they realise that the moral precepts are already part of the common-sense morality; or (b) the widespread agreement about basic moral judgements is the justification for the existence of common-sense morality itself.
- ii. *Care in defining common-sense morality:* Archard claims that common-sense morality can be defined as ‘the minimal set of core moral precepts that can be observed to be shared by all conscientious humans who seek to live their lives morally’.⁸ In order to back up his claim, he appeals to Beauchamp and Childress’s (supposed) depiction of common-sense morality that, ‘All persons who are serious about living a moral life already grasp the core dimensions of morality.’⁹
- iii. *Moral theory at odds with common-sense morality:* Archard acknowledges the fact that not all philosophers adhere to the claim that common-sense morality is the foundation of moral theory, for example, Plato and other contemporary moral philosophers.

A related and important issue is whether non-philosophers should follow the moral advice of moral philosophers. Archard argues that moral experts are equipped to systematize, to clarify, to disambiguate, and to modify common-sense morality, but they nevertheless ‘should not think that non-philosophers ought to endorse these judgements’,¹⁰ even though it might be the case that moral philosophers are moral experts in, at least, a *limited* sense.¹¹ However, the values of individual autonomy (against paternalism) and democracy (against the rule of a sagacious elite, e.g. moral and political philosophers) support the assertion that moral philosophers should ‘not lay claim to the exercise of even their limited expertise’.¹²

2.2 Examining the argument

Archard’s main argument – even though it is more sophisticated than the other arguments – is flawed and misleading at three critical points. The first point concerns his decisive premise that moral theory is based on common-sense morality, and the second issue concerns the definition of common-sense morality. Thirdly, Archard’s claim that moral philosophers – even in cases of supposed limited expertise – should not think that non-philosophers ought to follow their advice is unsubstantiated. The points are dealt with in order.

⁸ Ibid: 124.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid: 125.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid: 127.

- i. *Moral theory is based on common-sense morality*
The main premise of Archard’s argument is (highly) questionable since it is an open question whether it is really the case that moral theory is based on common-sense morality. As he correctly acknowledges, Plato is a prime counterexample, as he is a philosopher who argues that moral theory is at odds with common-sense morality. Other important philosophers such as Aristotle – only the practically wise person has moral knowledge and expertise and one should attempt to follow his advice – and Kant – one should act in accordance with the moral law independently of any empirical findings – hold the same view. On the contrary, it rather seems that *his version of* common-sense morality is based on moral theory by providing laypeople with simple but important moral claims in lieu of a complex moral theory. In this respect, common-sense morality can be seen as a set of important rules of thumb shaped according to moral theory. But what exactly does Archard mean by common-sense morality? The second point reveals that there are some difficulties with his notion of common-sense morality.

Furthermore, in his first additional claim to his main argument, he states that he wants to leave aside the question of whether moral philosophy is based on common-sense morality. Instead, Archard refers to two empirical observations in support of his claim: first, it might be the case that non-experts can only be appropriately *motivated* by moral theory if common-sense morality is the starting point (this would show a kind of familiarity); or secondly, it might be the case that the empirical observation of ‘the widespread endorsement of common-sense morality’ is self-justifying. In neither case can these observations be taken as convincing support for his main argument. More needs to be said about why moral theory should be anchored within common-sense morality; empirical claims are insufficient proof of his meta-ethical claim.

- ii. *The definition of common-sense morality*
In order to define the notion of common-sense morality Archard appeals to Beauchamp and Childress’s supposed depiction of what common-sense morality means. He quotes the following statement: ‘All persons who are serious about living a moral life already grasp the core dimensions of morality.’¹³ This is Archard’s second definition in his main argument. However, Archard is misreading Beauchamp and Childress on the notion of what common-sense morality means; his interpretation certainly supports his own view, but it nonetheless undermines the very sense of what both authors claim (or have

¹³ Ibid: 124.

claimed). A more adequate depiction of what common-sense morality is according to Beauchamp and Childress can be found in Gordon et al. (2011):¹⁴

In recent years, Beauchamp and Childress have offered three main ways to determine the common morality: (i) by appealing to morally serious persons, (ii) by appealing to persons committed to the objectives of morality, or (iii) by appealing to persons committed to morality. In the first approach, common morality is defined as a set of norms shared by all morally serious persons. In the second approach, common morality is defined as a set of norms shared by all persons committed to the objectives of morality, which are those ‘of promoting human flourishing by counteracting conditions that cause the quality of people’s lives to worsen’. In the third approach the notion of common morality is based neither on morally serious persons nor on the objectives of morality but on the idea that common morality – as a set of norms shared by all persons committed to morality – is applicable to all persons in all places and judges all human conduct.

There is good reason to assume that one should use the notion of common-sense morality (or simply, common morality) in a particular sense, namely, according to the first definition, that is to say by appealing to morally serious persons. On this account, it is clear that common-sense morality is justified by (or based on) the morally serious persons (and not justified by, for example, a coherentist theory of justification as probably suggested by Archard). A morally serious person might be similar – at least to some degree – to Aristotle’s practically wise person. But according to Archard it seems to be vital that the core moral precepts are shared by all ‘conscientious humans’.¹⁵ Two important questions should be answered in more detail in order to gain a better idea of what Archard means: What is a conscientious person? and What are the exact criteria of conscientiousness? In sum, Archard’s notion of common-sense morality is unclear and causes problems for his main argument.

iii. *Should non-philosophers follow the advice of moral experts?*

Archard argues that moral philosophers – even though they might have a limited moral expertise – should not want non-philosophers to follow their advice. This is because the values of autonomy and democracy displace the advantages of the limited

moral expertise.¹⁶ This line of reasoning is unconvincing, since better moral judgement usually results in better practice. If Archard did, indeed, think that his claim was true, he would not have stated the following: ‘His role should not be that of invoking his expertise to ensure that what is done follows from his own better moral judgment of what should be done. Rather it ought to be that of advising and of ‘coaching’ non-philosophers, ensuring that they may come to see why the better judgment *is* a better judgment.’¹⁷

It seems obvious, however, that moral philosophers do exactly what Archard depicts in his statement, namely, they try to advise and coach non-experts in order to help them to find the best possible result. And this is the particular reason why others should follow the moral expertise of moral philosophers. For example, in the clinical context in particular, of end-of-life decision-making, the expertise of clinical ethics’ consultants is highly regarded and they are regularly called on to assist in ethical reasoning and decision-making.¹⁸ Complex moral cases in medicine, simply speaking, need the right person with the right educational background; that is, a well-trained person with moral expertise.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems correct to state that Archard provides a sound refutation of the four main arguments against the claim that moral philosophers are not moral experts. However, his own refined argument in support of the claim that moral philosophers are not moral experts is unconvincing; in addition, his claim that non-experts should not follow the advice of moral experts is unsubstantiated. Even though I believe that moral philosophers are moral experts and others should follow their advice, I have not provided a specific argument in support of this claim but have confined myself to demonstrating that Archard’s main argument is flawed.

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¹⁶ Ibid: 126–127.

¹⁷ Ibid: 127.

¹⁸ J. Schildmann, J-S. Gordon & J. Vollmann. 2010. *Clinical Ethics Consultation. Theories and Methods, Implementation, Evaluation*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

¹⁴ J-S Gordon, O. Rauprich & J. Vollmann. Applying the Four-Principles Approach. *Bioethics* 2011; 25(6): 2011: 293–300.

¹⁵ Archard, *op. cit.* note 1, p. 124.