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Lay Beliefs in Moral Expertise

Susanne M. Schmittat¹ & Pascal Burgmer²

¹*Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria*

²*University of Kent, United Kingdom*

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susanne M. Schmittat, Criminal-Law Department, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Altenberger Strasse 69, 4040 Linz, Austria. E-mail: susanne.schmittat@jku.at. Phone: +4373224687451, ORCID: 0000-0002-6869-5748

Abstract

Compared to expertise in other domains, moral expertise remains a controversial topic. The current research employed a folk-psychological approach to explore which characteristics laypeople consider to be essential for moral expertise. Study 1 indicates that laypeople associate moral experts with a virtuous character and other-oriented behavior. Formal qualifications such as education and training are seen as less important for moral experts compared to other kinds of experts (Study 2a). However, professional judges—suggested by laypeople as moral experts—neither attributed the suggested characteristics of a moral expert to themselves, nor do they strongly believe in the existence of moral expertise (Study 2b). Finally, Study 3 adopted a more confirmatory approach and substantiated the key finding that laypeople expect moral experts to be rather virtuous than formally qualified, whereas for medical experts—as a comparison group—the reversed pattern emerged. Additionally, the difference between both characteristics was smaller for a moral than for medical experts. Taken together, laypeople seem to expect a more complex and balanced set of skills from a moral expert than from experts in other domains: moral experts need not only know about what is moral, but they also need to be moral.

Keywords: moral expertise, lay beliefs, folk psychology, morality, formal qualification, virtue

Introduction

Moral issues are not easy to solve. Consequently, people confronted with difficult moral situations may seek the help of someone, whom they perceive to be an expert in these matters. In his weekly column in a popular German newspaper, the “moral expert” Dr. Dr. Erlinger—who holds doctorates in both medicine and law—offers solutions to moral dilemmas like: “My son died and I found his diaries. Can I read them?”, “My partner really wants to get married, but I’m completely against marriage in general. How should we deal with this situation?”, or, “An extremely disliked and condescending colleague became very sick all of the sudden and now needs assistance to get to the office. Is it my moral obligation to help him, although I cannot stand him?” But why does the public trust Erlinger to have reasonable answers to their moral problems? What makes him—or anybody—an expert on moral decision-making? Is it his qualification (the two doctorates) or is it something else that makes him an expert on these issues?

Experts in any field are thought to make superior decisions, because they are highly knowledgeable and skilled information processors (Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Reyna & Lloyd, 2006; Salas, Rosen, & DiazGranados, 2010; Ste-Marie, 1999). Experts are also competent across complex situations and continuously excel in their area of expertise (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). Through extensive training they obtain efficiency and a low error rate (for a review on expertise, see Salas et al., 2010). It is therefore reasonable to expect a good solution from the sought-out expert for moral dilemmas like the ones described above. However, moral expertise has a unique set of problems, which other expertise fields do not have: it lacks well-defined identification standards. Specifically, it is unclear, in which domain the expert needs to have knowledge in or what type of experience is necessary for the expertise to develop. Beyond that, it is also unclear whether or not expertise can even exist in areas that do not offer objective answers (Archard, 2011; Gordon, 2014). In other domains, especially in sports but also in natural science, expertise can be measured by performance. For instance, a tennis

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player either wins or loses a match; a chemist either succeeds or fails at an experiment; a mathematician either solves a problem or the problem remains unsolved. Therefore, some scholars have concluded that moral expertise simply cannot exist, because moral issues lack that definitive answer (McGrath, 2008). Certainly, for some moral issues, there seems to be a clear and correct answer. For example, people probably agree that stealing, lying or cheating is immoral behavior. Yet, more complex moral situations such as the ones described in the beginning are not as easy to solve, and these are the ones where moral expertise might be needed the most. Similarly, the moral dilemmas described by Foot (1967) also do not have one right answer, but they instead pit different response inclinations (e.g., deontological and utilitarian judgments) against each other. Since people most likely do not seek out assistance in the simple cases, performance of moral experts matters most in the latter cases, which, as previously stated, cannot be assessed satisfactorily.

Likewise, accurate feedback is also not possible then. According to well-established conceptualizations of expertise (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Holyoak, 1991), the lack of feedback makes moral expertise unlikely to develop to a high standard, because behavior cannot be adapted without it.

All these uncertainties aside, people still seek out the help of moral experts or put them in charge of ethical boards. Scientific debates about the existence and definition of moral expertise notwithstanding (Archard, 2011; Gordon, 2014; Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012; Singer, 1972), we propose that considering the perspective of laypeople on the issue is an empirically overlooked but fruitful approach to the study of moral expertise. Examining the folk psychology of moral expertise might inform our understanding of the phenomenon and people's motivations to seek the advice of such experts.

Lay Beliefs in Moral Expertise

In the current research, we adopt a framework at the intersection of social-cognitive science, philosophy, and folk psychology (Knobe et al., 2012). This approach has identified a host of different beliefs and theories about the world that are held by laypeople (see Zedelius, Müller, & Schooler, 2017, for a recent overview). These beliefs span from rather tangible phenomena to metaphysical problems such as how minds relate to bodies (e.g., Forstmann & Burgmer, 2015, 2017) or whether minds are free (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005). Importantly, no matter how abstract these lay beliefs might be, they often have tangible outcomes in more applied settings, such as health behavior (Burgmer & Forstmann, 2018; Forstmann, Burgmer & Mussweiler, 2012), or morality (Shariff et al., 2014; Vohs & Schooler, 2008).

In a similar vein, people should also entertain such lay beliefs about morality and issues within the moral domain. After all, morality is viewed as most central to the self (Strohinger & Nichols, 2014), and it is a dimension that has great impact on how we perceive other people, and how we act towards them (e.g., Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). In fact, as we go about our daily lives, we deal with moral issues on a constant basis—when we ourselves act (im)morally, become the target of such behavior, or evaluate it (Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). Furthermore, people moralize the essence of a person, that is, his or her true self, when conceiving of it as fundamentally good (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014). Similarly, research at the intersection of philosophy and psychology has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of morality in shaping our basic psychology (Knobe, 2010).

Despite this obvious importance of morality in our everyday life, there is a surprising lack of empirical research into its conception by laypeople. Some studies have examined the influence of laypeople's incremental versus entity theories on how the perception of moral character influences trust recovery following a transgression (Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, &

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Wood, 2010), and others have explored laypeople's construal of moral phenomena such as lying (Wiegmann, Samland, & Waldmann, 2016), or people's inclinations to think of "good" and "bad" in terms of actual forces (Bastian et al., 2015).

However, to our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted yet into the questions of whether or not laypeople entertain the notion of moral expertise, what such beliefs in moral expertise might look like, and how these might extend our knowledge of the phenomenon. We conducted the present research to address these open questions. We believe that a folk-psychological perspective on moral expertise can be fruitful, as has been the case for other controversial topics at the intersection of philosophy and psychology such as the free-will debate (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Nahmias et al., 2005).

Two Approaches to Moral Expertise

In order to theoretically structure the topic, Jones and Schroeter (2012) have noted that there are two main approaches to the conceptualization of moral expertise. The first approach, the intellectualist model, focuses on moral-reasoning and decision-making skills (e.g., Singer & Wells, 1984). The second approach, the practical wisdom model, dismisses such an attempt of establishing superior moral decision making through formal qualification in the moral domain. Rather, moral expertise has little to do with abstract moral knowledge but with moral virtues acquired through experience (e.g., Jones & Schroeter, 2012). Here, we rely on the distinction between intellectualist and practical-wisdom models as a starting point to explore whether laypeople's intuitions about moral expertise can be broadly categorized accordingly.

The Intellectualist Model

According to the first approach, moral expertise is classified as the knowledge of the appropriate moral principles, well developed reasoning skills, and the capacity to identify fallacies (e.g., Singer & Wells, 1984). Here, moral expertise is about knowing the rules and applying them correctly. Moral decision-making also includes the gathering of information, the selection of relevant information, the combination of that information with a basic moral

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position, and the elimination of biases (Singer, 1972). Singer (1972) argues that someone who is familiar with moral concepts and moral arguments, and someone who also has the time and motivation to perform the information search and reasoning, is expected to reach sound conclusions. This notion is in line with the conceptualization of expertise, in which expertise is achieved through prolonged periods of experience and focused practice (Salas et al., 2010). Reasoning, logical thinking and moral concepts can be studied and improved through practice; thus, people should also be able to acquire expertise in the moral domain.

Consequently, philosophers could be classified as moral experts, because the described skill set matches the skill set a philosopher obtains during his studies. Yet, there are strong debates about philosophers' suitability as moral experts. On the one hand, there are theoretical discussions (Archard, 2011; Gordon, 2014; Singer, 1972). On the other hand, experimental philosophers and psychologists have started to examine the decisions of philosophers to determine their quality. Since performance cannot be measured by outcome if no objectively correct answer exists in the moral domain (Archard, 2011; Gordon, 2014), the outcome by itself does not allow to draw any conclusions about expertise (Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner, & Alexander, 2010). Using various moral dilemmas, it was investigated whether philosophers' decisions remain uninfluenced by the order in which the moral problems are presented. One might expect that moral experts would be immune to such potential order biases. Results, however, indicated that philosophers' judgements were by no means unbiased (Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012, 2015; Tobia, Buckwalter, & Stich; Wiegmann & Okan, 2012; Wiegmann, Okan, & Nagel, 2012).

However, biased judgments also occur in many other domains of expertise (e.g., Choudhry, Fletcher, & Soumerai, 2005; Englich & Mussweiler, 2001; Rachlinski, Guthrie, & Wistrich, 2007; Schmittat & Englich, 2016; Shanteau & Stewart, 1992). Consequently, the philosophers' documented biases are neither an argument against the existence of moral expertise, nor against the proposition that philosophers are indeed moral experts. Taken

together, relying on presumed moral experts' answers to determine the existence of moral expertise does not seem to be a fruitful approach.

Practical Wisdom Model

The second approach to defining moral expertise does not imply a specific education or particular training that leads to a superior decision-making process, but this approach focuses on practical wisdom. Here, having virtue is the most central part of being a moral expert (Jones & Schroeter, 2012). This is nothing that can be acquired through studying, but only through habituation and experience (see also Dancy, 1993). As Hulseley and Hampson (2014) but also Narvaez and colleagues (Narvaez, 2010; Narvaez & Gleason, 2007; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005) have proposed, moral expertise can develop from habit. Tailoring appropriate responses to moral environments leads to habits, which are then integrated into one's moral identity. Ultimately, this leads to moral expertise, which Hulseley and Hampson characterize as "deeper and better-integrated moral knowledge, a keener grasp of which actions are appropriate to a given situation, and faster and more nuanced moral responses" (2014, p. 1). In other words, our actions shape how we see ourselves, and this behavior then strengthens those beliefs that led to the initiation of said action. This pattern of action then becomes the basis of our moral identity (Hulseley & Hampson, 2014); or with Aristoteles words: we become virtuous by acting virtuously (as summarized in Bowditch, 2008),

According to this approach, laypeople should seek out virtuous persons for moral advice, because if a person comes across as mostly driven by moral virtues and by moral principles (as opposed to outcomes), they are also perceived as more trustworthy (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016) and warmer (Rom, Weiss, & Conway, 2017). Furthermore, signaling a more visceral and affect-based (as opposed to abstract and cognition-based) moral-reasoning process entails weaker ascriptions of self-righteousness (Weiss, Rom, Burgmer, & Conway, 2019). Thus, laypeople may overall be more likely to seek out moral help from such a virtuous expert—presumably because they also expect this expert to practice

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what he or she preaches. Consistently, laypeople may attribute the moral qualities that a priest preaches about to his or her character as well, thus ascribing moral virtues to him or her, which in turn may qualify priests to be moral experts under the practical-wisdom perspective (see Rossano, 2008, for a similar argument).

Taken together, consistent with the first approach to moral expertise (i.e., intellectualist model), laypeople may particularly appreciate the formal education and training of presumed moral experts such as Erlinger and therefore trust his judgment. Despite the fact that he is not a philosopher, but a lawyer and a medical doctor, laypeople might infer that he knows and applies moral rules correctly. Alternatively, and consistent with the second approach to moral expertise (i.e., practical-wisdom model), experts like Erlinger may be perceived by laypeople as moral persons with virtuous characters who have acquired moral wisdom through moral experience. What exactly deem moral advice-seekers important then: education and training, or a specific set of characteristics such as a virtuous character, or a combination of these? We designed the current research to empirically address this question.

Present Research

As has become evident, different theoretical and empirical approaches to moral expertise have yet to reach a conclusion what moral expertise actually is. However, advice from moral experts—granted that this kind of expertise does in fact exist—is frequently sought by laypeople, that is, by those who are most likely not familiar with the scientific discourse revolving around moral expertise. As we argue here, laypeople’s perspective on the issue might inform our knowledge of the nature of moral expertise and shed light on people’s motivations to seek or not seek this kind of expertise.

In a first exploratory study using an open-ended response format, we investigated folk beliefs about moral expertise and the characteristics that laypeople associate with this kind of expertise (Study 1). Building on these initial findings, in Study 2a, we randomly assigned participants to one of four expert-group conditions (i.e., moral vs. philosophy vs. science vs.

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medical expertise) and asked how strongly they associate particular characteristics (derived from Study 1) with the respective group of experts. Based on results from Study 1, we hypothesized that moral expertise is more strongly associated with personality characteristics than with formal qualifications such as education or training compared to the other expertise groups. Study 2b applied the same survey to a group of civil and criminal-law judges, who were among the suggested moral expertise professions in Study 1. The aim of Study 2b was to explore whether so-called moral experts perceive themselves to be moral experts, thus, whether they ascribe the same characteristics to themselves as laypeople do. Finally, Study 3 aimed to clarify the qualifications-virtues debate by having participants rate how much formal qualification compared to virtuous character a moral expert should have compared to a medical expert. It was hypothesized that a virtuous character trumps formal qualification for moral experts, but that this pattern would be reversed for medical experts.

Study 1

How do laypeople construe moral expertise?

Based on the literature on expertise and moral decision-making, we composed a number of questions to explore how laypeople construe moral expertise. For instance, how do laypeople define moral expertise and how do they characterize a moral expert? Additionally, this study explores whether or not laypeople actually believe in the existence of moral expertise. Study 1 also serves as the basis for the subsequent study that compares moral expertise to other kinds of expertise in a more systematic fashion.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 50 adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a study on "perception of morality" in exchange for monetary compensation. This study was a pilot study that was used to generate hypotheses and material for the subsequent studies. It was not a confirmatory, but a purely explorative study. Since the goal was to generate and code verbal material and, consequently, no inferential statistical tests needed to be performed,

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a sample size of $N = 50$ was deemed sufficient for this initial pilot study. An attention check item (i.e., “To monitor data quality, please move the slider to the number two”) was included to ensure data quality. Three participants failed this attention check and were removed from analysis. The final sample thus comprised 47 participants (21 females, 26 males; $M_{\text{Age}} = 31.96$, $SD = 9.73$) All participants answered the same set of questions in the order described below.

Materials and procedure. Participants were informed that the survey is about the perception of moral expertise and that they should provide spontaneous and honest answers to the questions. They were informed that keywords were allowed, but that the answers still needed to be interpretable. Four open questions were asked: 1) *how would you explain what a moral expert is [without using the words “moral” and “expert”]*? The phrasing of this question aimed to minimize answers like “an expert in morality”. This type of explanation would be uninformative and without any explanatory power, because it does not go beyond its disposition. 2) *Which characteristics/features do you associate with moral experts?* 3) *Please name a group of experts from a different domain. What do these experts have in common with moral experts? What distinguishes them from moral experts?* 4) *Please list some examples of which groups/professions you consider to be moral experts.* There were no time or space restrictions for participants’ responses. Afterwards, participants were asked to rate the importance of twelve characteristics for moral experts on a nine-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{not at all important}$, $9 = \text{very important}$): reliance on deliberation, intuition, broad general-knowledge, knowledge of human nature, integration into society, above average IQ, degree in philosophy, experience in moral decision-making, highly educated, efficient information processing skills, overall good personality and politically neutral. These items were presented in a fixed randomized order. Finally, participants were asked to indicate whether they thought moral expertise is in fact a “real expertise” (*yes, no, not sure*) followed by some final demographic questions.

Results

Open-ended questions. Some participants responded with only one keyword per questions, others provided more extensive answers, which we then coded into individual ‘units of meaning’ (Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Seuntjens, Zeelenberg, Breugelmans, & van de Ven, 2014, see SOM for responses and coding). There were no missing data; every single participant responded to each question.

Definition of moral expertise. The first question asked participants to explain moral expertise ($N = 54$ units of meaning). A great number of participants ($n = 17$) defined moral experts as “someone who knows what is right and what is wrong” or as “someone who knows the difference between good and bad” or semantically related definitions. Other responses included knowledge and wisdom ($n = 11$), a great character ($n = 6$), educated in the domain ($n = 4$), decision-making skills ($n = 4$), experience and practice ($n = 3$), general descriptions such as “judges”, “pope” ($n = 6$), and other responses ($n = 3$).

Characteristics of moral experts. The second question asked participants to list specific features and characteristics of moral expertise ($N = 137$, see supplementary materials for a complete list of the responses). About one third of the answers described moral experts as moral persons ($n = 47$), including characteristics such as being a good role model, nice, good natured and knowing the rules. This was followed by characteristics related to other-oriented behavior such as empathy and selflessness ($n = 35$) and characteristics related to intelligence and education ($n = 25$). Other characteristics related to decision-making (e.g., “analytical”, “logical”, “reflective”; $n = 11$), or professional attitude such as objectivity and unbiased ($n = 8$) were listed, but also a few negative characteristics like “judgmental” or “arrogant” ($n = 6$). Religiousness was mentioned two times. Three responses did not contain any specific content (e.g., “non-existent”).

Similarities and differences with other experts. Responses to the third question ($N = 47$) were classified according to the comparison group that was mentioned. Most often

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participants named scientists ($n = 10$), other academics ($n = 5$) such as philosophers or historians, or medical personnel ($n = 3$). Shared traits with *scientists* were experience, guidelines, knowledgeable, extremely intelligent, and possessing a moral compass. Differences were that scientists try to push moral boundaries and can observe change, whereas moral experts are bound to guidelines. Similar traits with *academics* were listed as having great knowledge about their respective field and highly intelligent. Differences were that academics do not engage in day-to-day issues, or are not as considerate of the needs of others. Shared traits with *doctors* were helping people and are the best in their field. Differences were that doctors are primarily concerned with getting people healthy and may not care about morality. Other comparison groups were legal personnel and cops ($n = 5$), or religious leaders ($n = 4$), technicians ($n = 3$) or others ($n = 4$). Other responses did not state any comparison group or did not mention any similarities or differences ($n = 13$).

Groups and professions associated with moral expertise. The last open-ended question asked participants to name a group or a profession that they associate with moral expertise ($N = 116$). The majority named religious people or religious institutions ($n = 39$). Law enforcement officers or officials from the judiciary or legislature were named second most often ($n = 24$). Social workers made up the third category ($n = 19$). Philosophers ($n = 8$), medical personnel ($n = 8$), or scientists ($n = 6$) were listed as well. Various other professions like veterans, activists or artists ($n = 9$) were also associated with moral expertise. Two participants responded with “none”.

Responses to rating items. Twelve items assessed a few central characteristics related to moral expertise. The results are listed in Table 1. A degree in philosophy and the reliance on intuition were the only two items that were not significantly different from the scale midpoint (5), $t(46) = .05, p > .90$, and $t(46) = .12, p > .90$, respectively). Items with the highest score were experience in moral decision-making ($t[46] = 7.23, p < .001$) and excellent knowledge of the human nature ($t[46] = 11.56, p < .001$).

- Insert Table 1 about here -

Endorsement of belief in moral expertise. The last question asked participants to indicate whether or not they believed in the existence of moral expertise: 38% answered yes, 26% answered no, and 36% were not sure. This suggests that endorsement of belief in moral expertise may show some meaningful variation worthwhile further investigations.

Discussion

First of all, answers to the first question show that participants went beyond providing a dispositional description (i.e., there were no answers like *a moral expert is somebody with expertise in morality*), as we intended. Together with the second question, the responses illustrate that laypeople associate moral expertise with a virtuous character and benign behavior towards others. A certain degree of objectivity, logical thinking and intelligence seem to be expected from a moral expert as well. Interestingly, participants did not mention a particular training, profession or set of skills as defining feature. Whereas experts are commonly defined as extremely knowledgeable, experienced, efficient problem-solvers and as determined professionals (Ericsson & Smith, 1991), none of these features were named in the context of moral expertise. Only when asked to compare moral experts with experts from other domains, similarities and dissimilarities also concentrated on professional or job-specific behavior and characteristics, such as knowledge, extremely intelligent, and thinking about logic. Hence, whereas moral expertise was first and foremost associated with a virtuous character other fields of expertise were more strongly associated with specific work-related qualities. This distinction emphasizes the uniqueness of this expertise.

Interestingly, most of the participants named religious people as example for moral experts, yet only 1% of the listed characteristics focused on religiosity like piousness. In laypeople's perception religious people are thought to have moral expertise, but being

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religious does not automatically imply moral expertise. The virtuous character that people associate with religious people may simply be a common denominator.

A bit more than one third of the sample agreed that moral expertise is a real expertise, and just as many people were not sure about its existence. This warrants the discussion about moral expertise: neither academics of the field (e.g., Rossano, 2008; Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012; Tobia et al., 2013) nor laypeople are sure if it exists. Although participants may not be sure about the existence of moral expertise or even indicated that they do not believe in it, they still had an idea of what moral expertise might look like and provided answers that did not seem to differ much from those participants who do believe in it. The sample was not big enough in order to be able to perform a systematic comparison of believers versus non-believers. However, everyone and independent of their support of the concept, seemed to have an idea about what moral expertise is. Therefore, we assume that believing in the concept is not a necessary precondition and people still have an idea about what it entails – similarly, non-believers can describe a religion or what belief in God may entail without subscribing to these notions themselves.

In spite of people's uncertainty about its existence, responses of Study 1 revealed important dimensions for moral expertise. First and foremost, a *virtuous character* seems to be a central feature. What laypeople simply call the ability to distinguish right from wrong and possessing a moral compass can be compared to the idea that moral expertise develops from repeatedly experiencing morally relevant situations in which the problem is assessed correctly and the appropriate response is chosen (i.e. habituation; Hulseley & Hampson, 2014). In addition, *other-oriented behavior* is another central characteristic. Since moral expertise naturally includes social judgments, the importance of these characteristics is not surprising, yet it remains undetermined whether or not these dimensions are especially pronounced in moral expertise compared to other domains.

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On the other hand, *formal qualifications* such as an education, training, above-average intelligence, and domain-specific knowledge were named less often as characteristic for moral expertise but received some attention when moral expertise was directly compared to other expertise. This first indication that formal qualifications are less important for moral expertise will be explored further. Additionally, a *professional attitude* that includes objectivity and unbiased judgements forms a fourth dimension that needs clarification.

Interestingly, *analytical thinking* received more attention from participants than *intuitive thinking*. Laypeople thus have the expectation that moral experts spend time and effort on the decision at hand. This is noteworthy, because researchers still debate whether or not moral decisions are based on intuition (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001) or deliberation (Pizarro & Bloom, 2003).

Study 1 focused on the associations that laypeople have with moral expertise. Using the discovered dimensions, the following experimental study investigates whether laypeople's perceptions of these dimensions differ for moral experts compared to other experts.

Study 2a

Do laypeople differentiate moral experts from other experts?

In order to further explore what makes moral expertise unique, the next study directly compares moral expertise with other fields of expertise. Based on Study 1's findings, we designed Study 2a to further explore the relevant dimensions that laypeople use to characterize moral experts, and that may differentiate them from experts in other domains. In an experimental between-subjects design, we had participants think about a moral expert (or an expert from one of three other domains) and provide various judgments about the respective expert group.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 203 adults from MTurk (79 females, 124 males; $M_{Age} = 33.70$, $SD = 10.42$) in exchange for monetary compensation. We included the

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same attention-check item as in Study 1. No participants were excluded from data analysis.

Participants were randomly assigned to provide judgments about one of four target experts: moral expert versus medical expert versus science expert versus philosophy expert.

Materials and procedure. Participants were informed that the study is about perceptions of expertise. Depending on condition, they were asked to picture a moral expert, a medical expert, a science expert, or a philosophy expert. Examples for each expertise condition were provided, for instance, in the moral-expert condition the examples included an ethicist working in an ethical commission, a religious professional, or a judge. Provided examples were based on responses to Study 1. Participants' first task was to indicate how strongly they associate 40 characteristics with the expert group they had been assigned to (1 = *not strong at all*, 9 = *extremely strong*). Twenty-eight of these items focused on moral expertise and were based on the results from Study 1; twelve items (e.g., technical know-how) were added to also include expected characteristics typical for other domains of expertise. Using a slightly different response format, subsequently, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to fifteen descriptions about their expert group, for instance, "They [moral/ medical/ science/ philosophy experts] consider the consequences of their decisions" (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*). Twelve of these statements reflected participants' responses from Study 1; three statements were about intuitive and deliberative thinking styles, and knowledge of human nature.

Based on the results from Study 1, we collapsed these items to make up the six dimensions on which experts may be differentiated by laypeople: virtuous character (e.g., possessing a moral compass, moral character, high standard of conduct; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$), other-oriented behavior (e.g., selflessness, helping, good communication skills; $\alpha = .94$), formal qualifications (e.g., know-how, educated, credentials; $\alpha = .87$), professional attitude (e.g., objectivity, professionalism, hard-working; $\alpha = .78$), intuitive thinking (e.g., sensing the right answer, rely on intuition; $\alpha = .73$), and deliberative thinking (e.g., rely on deliberation,

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analytical thinking, thoroughness; $\alpha = .75$; see the supplementary materials for a complete list of the items). Additionally, participants rated the diversity of the expert's work and the extent to which their work is associated with everyday issues. Finally, participants were asked to indicate which kind of expert they had in mind while responding to the questionnaire, which served as a manipulation check.

Results

Manipulation check. The majority of the participants indicated an appropriate example for their respective expertise condition. Eleven participants did not provide answers that reflected the assigned expertise group. These participants were excluded from further analyses.

Lay perceptions of characteristics. To investigate how moral experts are perceived compared to the other expert groups, we conducted a MONOVA with the six dimensions plus the additional two items on work diversity and everyday issues as dependent variables and expertise condition as between-subjects variable. Expertise significantly influenced all of the assessed dimensions: virtuous character, $F(3, 188) = 6.83, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$; other-oriented behavior, $F(3, 188) = 9.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$; formal qualifications, $F(3, 188) = 22.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$; professional attitude, $F(3, 188) = 4.58, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .07$; intuitive thinking, $F(3, 188) = 4.88, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .07$; deliberative thinking, $F(3, 188) = 17.21, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$; work diversity, $F(3, 188) = 6.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$; everyday issues, $F(3, 188) = 4.68, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .07$ (Table 2). Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons were conducted to further investigate these effects.

- Insert Table 2 about here -

Moral experts versus medical experts. Moral experts and medical experts were rated equally high on the dimensions other oriented-behavior, professional attitude, intuitive thinking, and everyday issues (all $ps > .10$), but moral experts were associated with more

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virtuous character ($t[95] = 2.77, p = .037, \text{Cohen's } d = 0.54$), less formal qualifications ($t[95] = -5.60, p < .001, d = -1.16$), and less deliberative thinking ($t[95] = -4.01, p = .001, d = -0.83$) than were medical experts. Also, moral experts were associated with less diversity of work ($t[95] = -3.40, p = .005, d = -0.73$).

Moral experts versus science experts. Comparing moral experts and science experts revealed that both received an equally high rating on the dimension professional attitude and the item everyday issues (both $ps > .20$), but moral experts were again associated with a greater virtuous character ($t[91] = 3.30, p = .007, d = 0.74$), more other-oriented behavior ($t[91] = 4.45, p < .001, d = 0.86$), less formal qualifications ($t[91] = -5.32, p < .001, d = -1.01$), less intuitive thinking ($t[91] = -2.74, p = .041, d = -0.59$), less deliberative thinking ($t[91] = -5.30, p < .001, d = -1.12$), and less work diversity ($t[91] = -2.69, p = .046, d = -0.55$).

Moral experts versus philosophy experts. Moral experts and philosophy experts received equally high ratings on the dimensions formal qualification, deliberative thinking, everyday issues, and on the item work diversity (all $ps > .90$). Moral experts were, however, associated with a more virtuous character ($t[94] = 4.33, p < .001, d = 0.82$), more other-oriented behavior ($t[94] = 4.69, p < .001, d = 0.90$), slightly more professional attitude ($t[94] = 2.66, p = .051, d = 0.53$), but with less intuitive thinking ($t[94] = -3.07, p = .015, d = -0.63$).

Discussion

In this study, participants were asked to picture an expert from a given expertise group (moral, medical, science or philosophy) and to indicate how strongly they associate various characteristics and descriptions with that expertise group. This approach helped to shed light on how moral expertise is perceived in comparison to other expertise groups. Most notably, differences in virtuous character, other-oriented behavior and formal qualifications emerged. Moral experts are more strongly associated with a virtuous character compared to all other experts, even compared to another social expertise such as medical personnel. Laypeople may use the character to evaluate competence. This is in line with other findings (Stellar & Willer,

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2018) and endorses this character-based approach to moral expertise. On the other hand, formal qualifications such as a specific training and a high IQ were more strongly associated with medical and scientific experts than with moral or philosophy experts.

Intuitive and deliberate decision-making styles were not judged as mutually exclusive for moral expertise by participants. Whereas for other expertise groups we identified one dominant thinking-style (deliberation in medical and science expertise, or intuition in philosophy, see Table 2 for means and standard deviations), moral expertise was equally strong associated with both intuition and deliberation. In the moral decision-making literature, it is also discussed whether moral decisions are based on intuitions or on deliberation (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003). These results emphasize the unique profile of moral experts. A good and caring character as well as advanced social skills and a concern for others trump the importance of educational and formal training. Yet, formal qualifications were not entirely disregarded either. Also, similar to other experts, moral experts are expected to judge objectively and to leave their personal interest out of the matter. Moral experts work on everyday issues, yet, their work does not leave the impression to be very diverse in the eyes of a lay person. In principle, it is possible that participants were biased towards the intellectualist model by the provided examples, since all of the examples represent a profession that involves education and training. However, the results do not reflect this. A virtuous character combined with other-oriented behavior received the highest importance ranking, formal qualification was less important. Thus, it seems rather unlikely that participants' responses were biased in a particular direction.

Furthermore, the present results show that laypeople do not ascribe the same characteristics, qualification or task description to both moral and philosophy experts. Philosophy experts scored lower on virtuous character items and lower on other-oriented behavior, but this social element seems to be a requirement for moral expertise. Consequently,

philosophers may not be perceived as moral experts by laypeople, as has been suggested elsewhere (Archard, 2011; Gordon, 2014; Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012; Singer, 1972).

A profession that involves the interaction with other people and whose members were also listed as possible candidates for moral expertise is the judiciary or law enforcement. But how do legal experts define moral expertise, do they think of themselves as moral experts, and do their conceptualizations match those of laypeople's? We designed the next study to address these questions and gain insights from the perspective of moral experts themselves.

Study 2b

Do legal experts consider themselves to be moral experts?

In Study 1, participants listed examples of moral experts which included legal professionals. Judges face and evaluate moral transgressions on a daily basis, providing them with a unique possibility to develop decision-making skills in the moral domain. This regular routine should also provide professional judges with the extensive amount of experience required for the development of expertise (Ericsson et al., 1993). Again, since expertise performance simply cannot be measured by decision outcomes, the same folk-psychological method as in the previous studies was applied. Thus, how do the judges perceive themselves? Do they share the laypeople's perception of moral expertise? Also, judges are highly educated and trained. If they do perceive themselves as moral experts, this could provide support for the intellectualist model. Alternatively, if they indicate that a moral character or other-oriented behavior is needed just as much as their formal training, this would support the holistic view: both parts are required. Hence, extending Study 2a, a sample of legal experts rated themselves on the same items as in Study 2a in order to compare their self-reported set of characteristics to the profile generated by laypeople.

Methods

Participants and design. We recruited 27 judges (9 females, 17 males, one unidentified; $M_{\text{age}} = 44.24$, $SD = 10.30$). They had an average of 15.46 years of experience on

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the bench ($SD = 10.41$). The majority indicated that they are civil-law judges ($n = 18$), some criminal-law judges ($n = 4$), and others labor-law judges ($n = 4$). One participant did not indicate his area of specialization. All participants received the identical questionnaire.

Materials and procedure. Participants were recruited during a conference at the German Academy of Judges (*Deutsche Richterakademie*). They were informed that laypeople had listed judges as an example for moral experts, and that they, therefore, are considered to be moral experts by the public. Participants then indicated how important the characteristics from the previous study are for their jobs. Participants saw a German translation of the 55 items from Study 2a (nine-point Likert-type scale: 1 = *not strong at all*, 9 = *extremely strong*, or 1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*). Additionally, belief in the existence of moral expertise, as well as personal opinion about whether or not they see themselves as moral experts, were assessed (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*). Finally, they were asked to indicate whom they would consider to be a moral expert.

Results and Discussion

One-sample t -tests indicated that scores on all dimensions were significantly above the scale midpoint (5), all t s > 4 , all p s $< .001$ (see Table 2 for the descriptive statistics), with the highest rating for professional attitude ($t[26] = 18.18, p < .001$). None of the dimensions was rated as unimportant for their job, implying that a diverse skill set is needed for their profession. However, legal experts' belief in the existence of moral expertise was not significantly different from the scale's midpoint ($M = 4.22, SD = 2.49$), $t(26) = -1.63, p > .10$. They also did not consider themselves moral experts ($M = 3.63, SD = 2.19$), $t(26) = -3.26, p = .003$. Yet, the more the legal experts believed in the existence of moral expertise, the more they thought that a virtuous character is important for their current job, $r(25) = .581, p = .001$, and the more they thought formal qualifications were important, $r(25) = .376, p = .054$. Again, this points towards a holistic view of moral expertise, implying that virtuous character and formal qualifications are not mutually exclusive. Also, the more they believed in the

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existence of moral expertise, the more they thought of themselves as moral experts, $r(25) = .766, p < .01$.

When asked to name possible moral experts (50 response units), the majority ($n = 22$) mentioned various clergy members (e.g., priest, imam, nun). Nine units mentioned members from the judiciary (e.g., judges), six mentioned philosophers, three medical personnel, and ten various other groups (e.g., journalists, teachers). Two participants left this item unanswered. In summary, even judges have difficulty to narrow down moral expertise to a specific set of qualities or even to one profession. Since this Study had a limited participant sample, more studies should be conducted about how so-called moral experts perceive themselves.

Study 3

How much formal qualification and virtuous character do laypeople expect from moral experts?

So far, our studies show that laypeople associate slightly different characteristics with a moral expert compared to experts from other fields. Specifically, formal qualification that is acquired through education, training and experience (Ericsson et al., 1993) is not regarded the strongest requirement for moral expertise. Instead, a virtuous character combined with other-oriented behavior differentiates moral experts from other experts. Still, this does not imply that moral expertise is entirely about virtue that develops through habituation (Hulsey & Hampson, 2014; Narvaez, 2010; Narvaez & Gleason, 2007; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005), because formal qualification was not rated as a completely unimportant feature. Rather, it seems that laypeople require both features to some degree when thinking of moral experts, with a slightly stronger focus on a virtuous character, compared to other expert groups.

The aim of this final study was to determine how much virtuous character, and how much formal qualification a moral expert should have in the eyes of a lay person, because the relative contribution of both characteristics compared to other expert groups remains unclear.

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In the present study, we chose to compare moral experts with medical experts, because both expert groups are associated with a strong social component.

Based on the previous findings, we hypothesized that laypeople would judge a virtuous character to be of greater importance than formal qualifications for moral experts, whereas we expected the reversed pattern for medical experts, for whom formal qualifications should be judged as more important than a virtuous character. Finally, we anticipated that the difference between both judgments of importance would be smaller for moral experts compared to medical experts, thus signifying a more balanced evaluation of both characteristics for moral experts.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 298 adults from MTurk (159 females, 136 males, 3 other; $M_{Age} = 34.93$, $SD = 10.99$) in exchange for monetary compensation. We included a similar attention-check item as in previous studies. Eleven participants failed this attention-check item and were excluded from data analysis¹. In a within-subjects design, all participants made judgments regarding moral experts and medical experts. Order of the two expert groups was counterbalanced across participants.

Materials and procedure. Participants were asked to picture experts from two different domains and to indicate how much of a certain characteristic the respective expert should have. First, participants saw examples of moral and medical experts, respectively, (moral: an ethicist working in an ethical commission, a religious professional or a judge; medical: a surgeon, a doctor, or a nurse). Next, participants indicated how much of the following characteristic the moral (medical) expert should have from 0 to 100 with a total of 100. The two characteristics were “virtuous character” and “formal qualifications”. For each characteristic, examples were provided (virtuous character: patient, good role model, honest,

¹ Prior to this study, participants completed an unrelated survey, including a between-subjects manipulation that did not produce any significant effects on the items of the present studies.

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wise; formal qualifications: educated, highly knowledgeable, intelligent, experienced).

Participants received an error message if their responses did not add up to 100.

Results and Discussion

In order to determine the relative contribution of a virtuous character in comparison with formal qualifications in moral experts compared to other expert groups, the proportions of responses for virtuous character were determined for both groups. Results of a paired sample *t*-test indicated that the proportion of responses for virtuous character were greater for the moral experts ($M = .58, SD = .17$) than for the medical experts ($M = .32, SD = .17$), $t(284) = 20.91, p < .000, d = 1.24$).

Consistent with our hypothesis that a virtuous character is considered an important yet not the sole characteristic of moral experts, results of this last study show that laypeople indicate that for moral experts, the ratio between virtuous character and formal qualifications should be approximately 60-40. In contrast, for medical expert, laypeople indicate that this ratio should be 30-70. Not only is this a reversed pattern, but the difference between virtuous character and formal qualification is much smaller for moral than for medical experts. This further supports the previous results that it is neither virtue nor education alone that define moral expertise as the ongoing debate might suggest, but that in the eyes of laypeople, both features are necessary.

General Discussion

“Believe one who has proved it. Believe an expert.” Although the Roman poet Virgil did not provide an extensive definition of expertise, he does mention a very specific feature: expertise is something you earn. But how is expertise earned in a domain that neither has a specific training nor provides performance feedback? Moral expertise is a prime example for this puzzling phenomenon. The present research adds a laypeople’s perspective to the discussion of moral expertise by addressing how ordinary people construe this kind of expertise.

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Study 1 revealed that moral experts are not only judged along performance dimensions (e.g., having knowledge about the domain), but on their personality as well (e.g., having a kind heart). Studies 2a and 3 corroborated this lay conception of moral expertise by indicating that participants regard both, formal qualification and virtuous character, as key ingredients that distinguish moral experts from other types of experts (e.g., medical experts). Overall, the present results suggest a more holistic view of moral expertise, such that laypeople seem to expect a more diverse set of characteristics from a moral expert than from other kinds of experts.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The present research contributes to the ongoing debate about moral expertise by adding a folk-psychological perspective. Particularly, it suggests that laypeople do not consider any of the previously discussed characteristics as sufficient, but that they entertain a more complex view on what constitutes a moral expert. Furthermore, Study 2b hints at a possible discrepancy between the public's perception of a moral expert and what the moral expert thinks about him- or herself. Within the moral domain, it is not new that philosophers, laypeople or moral experts have different views on the same issue, for instance, some moral topics such as abortion laypeople may not be regarded as an ethical issue at all by some laypeople, whereas philosophers overwhelmingly do or are in much more disagreement about the issue (Wright, Grandjean, & McWhite, 2013). Also, laypeople are more confident that correct answers to some moral questions exist (Beebe & Sackris, 2016). Hence, laypeople, as well as moral experts themselves, can provide insights regarding the nature of moral expertise that may otherwise be overlooked.

Furthermore, our findings are well in line with recent person-centered approaches to moral judgment (for an overview, see Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). Whereas much of the previous research has focused on the moral permissibility of acts (e.g., whether actions violate moral principles or maximize overall outcomes), people in fact seem to be naïve virtue

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theorists. Specifically, laypeople often observe and judge behavior of others in order to determine their moral character. As the present research indicates, such a primacy of character may be particularly important for expertise in the moral domain. Consistently, even children understand the value of character traits and prefer moral advice from a person capable of comprehending emotions—as opposed to an intellectually superior machine, for example (Danovitch & Keil, 2008). Insofar as laypeople are intuitive virtue theorists who put great emphasis on moral traits such as integrity and empathy for others, they seem to hold moral experts to these high standards as well.

Jones and Schroeter (2012) named two models of defining moral expertise, the intellectualist model and the practical wisdom model. Certainly, there are other approaches as well. For instance, according to philosopher John Searle, something or someone can have a formal or an informal status (Searle, 1995). This is a similar yet not identical distinction as the one made by the intellectualist and practical wisdom models. A formal status implies constitutive rules such as a certain education or training, and a certificate. Informal implies that society has simply accepted a person to be an expert on that matter, yet, there are no rules when or even why this collective intentionality happened.

At first sight, moral expertise seems to fit the informal status description, whereas other forms of expertise are of formal status. However, if the research aim is not only about finding out whom laypeople accept as moral expert, but about their characteristics and the development of expertise, a model that is more detailed in this regard is needed. Within the present topic, the formal-informal distinction is thus more about society's acceptance of somebody as a moral expert, whereas the practical wisdom model, for instance, emphasizes the development of moral expertise. Here, habituation is responsible, which is the repeated confrontation with moral situations and the finding of solutions. Furthermore, the used methodology of the present studies contradicts a clear assignment of moral expertise as an informal status, because the examples that were provided for moral experts also included

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formally recognized experts such as priests or judges. Second, participants also named some aspects that imply a formal status such as education. Perhaps, formal and informal are not exclusive, but could be seen as a dimension, with moral expertise being somewhere in the middle, but leaning towards an informal status. Either way, the intellectualist model and the practical wisdom model were used as starting points in an empirically still developing research field.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Studies 1 through 2b were of rather explorative nature and represent the first empirical attempt to illuminate how laypeople and so-called moral experts think about moral expertise. Consistent with our confirmatory approach in Study 3, future research might focus on additional characteristics to gain a more complete picture of what constitutes moral expertise. Additionally, Study 2a is limited to the comparison with three other types of expertise (i.e., philosophy, science, medicine). Therefore, it remains unclear whether or not moral expertise is unique or only unique compared to these other expertise groups. Furthermore, the expert sample of Study 2b was small and limited to legal professionals. Future research should survey other expertise groups such as religious leaders, philosophers, or law enforcement officers.

Also, a limitation of the present studies was that moral expertise was approached as if only one prototypical moral expert exists – not in the sense of a profession, but the studies did not differentiate between somebody like Dr. Dr. Erlinger (a moral coach) or somebody like John McCain (a moral virtuoso). The provided examples in Studies 2a and 3 (i.e., religious leader, ethicist or judge) were designed to cover a great variety of possibilities, but it was left to the participant to choose what specific exemplar of a moral expert – if any – he or she thought of while answering the questionnaire. If participants had somebody like Erlinger in mind, this would explain answers that focused on advice-giving and objectivity, and also empathy or analytical thinking. On the other hand, some people may have thought about a

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virtuous person, somebody who behaves exceptionally well and might be perceived as a moral exemplar. This would explain why some participants responded that a moral expert should have a great character, should be a moral person and a great role model. It could also be that participants switched back and forth between moral coach and moral virtuoso within the same study, depending on which question they were answering. This could also have contributed to the greater variability of features associated with moral expertise compared to other types of expertise.

Whereas this distinction between moral coach and moral virtuoso was not the focus of the present research, it is something that should be investigated in the future. It could be argued that a moral coach and a moral virtuoso are two very different things and seeing them as one entity (by asking participants to think of *moral experts*) might limit people's perspective on the matter. However, we would hypothesize that it is not easy to clearly separate the two types of moral expertise. It could be that a moral coach does not need to act morally him/herself in order to provide sound advice, or that a moral virtuoso could be terrible in giving moral advice, but we think that laypeople have difficulty differentiating the two. A tennis coach is of course assumed to be good at tennis. A math professor is assumed to be good in math and—at least to a higher degree than a math novice—also expected to be able to teach the matter. Therefore, even if these two are not interdependent, we assume that the majority of laypeople have difficulty to separate the two.

Beyond that, exploring both antecedents as well as the consequences of beliefs in moral expertise could substantially contribute to the understanding of moral expertise. Thus far, we know little about why some people believe in moral expertise and others do not or are unsure, or how the belief in moral expertise relates to other prominent beliefs such as religious beliefs or belief in science. Consistently, research on the consequences of beliefs in moral expertise might investigate when laypeople seek moral advice and whom they would contact. Do they accept the moral advice more willingly if the expert has the formal

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qualifications, is virtuous or fulfills both? The present research suggests that advice seekers might have more complex expectations towards moral experts than other kinds of experts. Addressing these and other open questions may eventually lead to a more complete picture of what moral expertise is and help answer questions such as why ordinary readers of a news magazine turn to a doctor of medicine and law to have him figure out the most pressing moral issues of their daily lives.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of rating items of Study 1

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
excellent knowledge of human nature	50	2	9	7.76	1.57
experience in moral decision-making	50	1	9	7.42	2.17
broad general knowledge	50	1	9	7.16	2.04
efficient information processing skills	50	2	9	7.10	2.09
rely on deliberation	50	1	9	6.84	2.12
overall good personality	50	1	9	6.74	2.43
politically neutral	50	1	9	6.62	2.54
highly educated	50	1	9	6.54	2.38
integrated into society	50	1	9	6.30	2.43
above average IQ	50	1	9	5.74	2.52
degree in philosophy	50	1	9	5.06	2.71
rely on intuition	50	1	9	5.04	2.40
Valid N	50				

Note: Importance rating of moral experts' characteristics (1 = *not important at all*, 9 = *very important*), displayed in descending order of importance.

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Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Studies 2a ($N = 192$) and 2b ($N = 27$)

Characteristic	Study 2a								Study 2b	
	Moral		Medical		Science		Philosophy		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Virtuous character	7.41	1.26	6.79	1.13	6.65	0.88	6.43	1.20	6.38	0.71
Other-oriented behavior	7.66	1.16	7.15	1.13	6.56	1.08	6.52	1.37	6.60	0.90
Formal qualifications	6.82	1.16	8.00	0.85	7.96	1.09	6.72	1.04	6.83	0.87
Professional attitude	7.10	0.92	6.88	0.87	7.26	0.96	6.60	0.95	7.15	0.61
Intuition	6.26	1.24	6.38	1.31	6.94	1.07	7.01	1.12	5.94	1.10
Deliberation	6.53	1.13	7.41	0.98	7.72	1.00	6.40	1.20	6.52	0.83
Work diversity	5.78	1.94	7.10	1.64	6.85	1.91	5.80	2.08	7.89	1.05
Everyday issues	7.43	1.44	7.28	1.43	6.74	1.72	6.37	1.69	7.19	1.36

Note: Participants of Study 2a were lay participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk; participants of Study 2b were legal experts recruited from the German Academy of Judges.