**“Your Mother Should Know: Pregnancy as an Epistemically Transformative Experience and the Value of the Human Foetus” [[1]](#footnote-2)**

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*\*\*Work in Progress\*\**

**Abstract**

An epistemically transformativeWIDE experience transforms the subject’s epistemic status with respect to some knowledge, providing access to knowledge that is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp without the experience. I argue that pregnancy provides a woman\* with an epistemically transformativeWIDE acquaintance with her foetus. Here, I draw an analogy between knowledge of moral value and knowledge of aesthetic value. It is widely accepted that being acquainted with an artwork puts a person in a better epistemic position with respect to its aesthetic value. When I first saw the Mona Lisa, I was suddenly in a much better position to judge its aesthetic value: reading the most detailed description would not have the same effect. I argue that acquaintance provides a similar epistemic advantage when it comes to moral value. However, knowledge of moral truths can be acquired through application of moral principles or through thought experiments or testimony. Acquaintance is only epistemically transformative with respect to knowledge of moral value when other methods of acquiring moral knowledge do not provide the same epistemic status. This occurs when either there are barriers to acquiring knowledge through those means, or the status of knowledge acquired through those means is not the same as knowledge acquired through acquaintance. The pregnant woman\*’s[[2]](#footnote-3) acquaintance with her foetus meets these conditions.

**Introduction**

L.A. Paul has famously argued that some experiences are epistemically transformative, providing knowledge that the subject could not have otherwise acquired.[[3]](#footnote-4) I argue elsewhere[[4]](#footnote-5) that we should also be interested in experiences that are epistemically transformative in a wider sense. These experiences transform the subject’s epistemic status with respect to some knowledge, providing access to knowledge that is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp without the experience. This paper is part of a larger project showing that pregnancy is an epistemically transformative experience in both Paul’s narrow sense and in my wider sense – and that this has implications for debate about the ethics of abortion and applied ethics more generally.

Ethical debate on abortion has typically focused on two key questions. First, what is the moral status of the human foetus (henceforth ‘foetus’)?[[5]](#footnote-6) Second, granting the assumption that the foetus has significant moral status, what duties does the pregnant woman\*[[6]](#footnote-7) have to sustain the foetus?[[7]](#footnote-8) I suggest that pregnancy is epistemically transformativeWIDE with respect to both these questions. Most obviously, the pregnant woman\* can acquire knowledge about what it is like to be pregnant, which is crucial for answering the second question. Unless we have an adequate grasp of what pregnancy is like, we will not understand what it is to ask someone to remain pregnant against their will and thus whether this can be required of a pregnant woman\*. I argue elsewhere that this knowledge is epistemically transformative in both my wide sense and Paul’s narrow sense: it is extremely difficult for those who have not been pregnant to acquire any grasp of what it is like to be pregnant, and indeed, it is not possible to fully grasp what it is like to be pregnant without being pregnant.

My focus here is whether pregnancy transforms the pregnant woman\*’s epistemic position with respect to the first question: what is the moral status of the foetus? I argue that a pregnant woman\* can gain knowledge about the value of a foetus through her\* acquaintance with her\* foetus during her\* pregnancy. I draw an analogy between knowledge of moral value and knowledge of aesthetic value. It is widely accepted that being acquainted with an artwork puts a person in a better epistemic position with respect to its aesthetic value. [[8]](#footnote-9) When I first saw the Mona Lisa, I was suddenly in a much better position to judge its aesthetic value: reading the most detailed description would not have the same effect. I suggest that acquaintance can provide a similar epistemic advantage when it comes to knowledge of moral value. Acquaintance is epistemically transformativeWIDE with respect to moral value when it transforms the agent’s epistemic position with respect to some knowledge of moral value, so that she is in a better position to make the relevant moral judgments than she could otherwise be in. This occurs when other methods of acquiring moral knowledge (application of principles, thought experiments and testimony) do not provide the same epistemic status either because there are barriers to acquiring knowledge through those means, or because the status of knowledge acquired through those means is not the same as knowledge acquired through acquaintance. It is epistemically transformativeNARROW with respect to moral value when it provides access to some knowledge which cannot be acquired through these means. I argue that the pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her\* foetus meets the first of these conditions and may well meet the second. Pregnancy is epistemically transformativeWIDE with respect to the moral value of the foetus and may well also be epistemically transformativeNARROW.

**Acquaintance as Epistemically Transformative in Aesthetics and Ethics**

The role of acquaintance in moral knowledge has not been widely discussed. Errol Lord’s forthcoming paper “How To Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Testimony” is a notable exception. [[9]](#footnote-10) However, Lord understands acquaintance widely, so that a person can be acquainted with the relevant moral properties by imagining a case.[[10]](#footnote-11) I understand acquaintance much more narrowly: you don’t count as acquainted with the Mona Lisa in the relevant sense if you have merely imagined it after reading *The Works of Leonardo Da Vinci*; you don’t count as acquainted in the relevant sense with a foetus if you have merely imagined it after reading *What To Expect When You’re Expecting*. Is acquaintance in this narrower sense relevant to moral knowledge?

Lord discusses a striking example based on George’s Orwell’s ‘A Hanging’. George, an anglo police officer is required to guard over the execution of a Burmese man for an unknown crime. As Lord notes, this incident is plausibly based on Orwell’s own experience. Lord quotes at length from Orwell:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working —bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.[[11]](#footnote-12)

This example involves acquaintance in my narrow sense. George clearly gained moral knowledge. Previously, he had not realised what it meant to kill. He now fully grasps the moral seriousness of killing.[[12]](#footnote-13) But if his experience is to count as epistemically transformative with respect to moral knowledge, we need more. We need his acquaintance with the process of killing to have transformed his epistemic position, so that he is in a better position to make the relevant moral judgments than he could otherwise be in. For a full parallel with the aesthetic case, we also need George’s experience to allow him to engage with the moral value of the killing in a way that would not be possible through mere description.

George’s experience meets both of these conditions. Having this kind of experience is not just one way among others to realise the moral seriousness of capital punishment. Death is extremely difficult to for us to imagine. Without direct experience, it is almost impossible to grasp exactly what it means for a person to come to an end. Moreover, as is clear from Orwell’s description, capital punishment does not involve death from illness or death in the white heat of a life-threatening situation, but death deliberately bestowed upon someone who is healthy. George sees a peculiar wrongness in “cutting a life short when it is in full tide.” This adds an additional difficulty for our imaginations.

To explain what George gains through acquaintance, I draw a distinction between two types of knowledge: ‘information’ and ‘grasp’. Information involves knowing that certain propositions are true. We might suppose that before his experience, George had the information that capital punishment involves ending the life of a healthy, conscious man. He knew that the proposition: ‘A healthy conscious man’s life will end’ was true. However, as Orwell notes, before his experience, George did not understand the significance of this proposition. He “had not realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man.” I call this deeper knowledge, which George acquires only after his direct acquaintance with the hanging, ‘grasp’.

My distinction between grasp and information bears some relation to Alison Hills’ distinction between knowledge and understanding. Hills argues that it is pro tanto wrong to rely on moral testimony because virtue requires not merely knowledge of moral truths but also understanding of why those truths obtain. Understanding why a moral truth obtains requires you to appreciate the reasons why it obtains. This involves more than simply knowing the reasons it obtains. In Hills’ words, “Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true.”[[13]](#footnote-14) Furthermore, moral understanding also requires the ability to make predictions about similar cases. Thus understanding why p requires a complex set of abilities.

Hills summarises her view elsewhere: “In order to understand why p, you need to grasp the reasons why p where this grasp is explained as a set of abilities. So to understand why p, you need to judge that p and that q is why p and in the right sort of circumstances, you can successfully:

1. follow an explanation of why p given by someone else
2. explain why p in your own words;
3. draw the conclusion that p (or that probably p) from the information that q;
4. draw the conclusion that p’ (or that probably p’) from the information that q’ (where p’ and q’ are similar to but not identical to p and q);
5. given the information that p, give the right explanation, q;
6. given the information that p’, give the right explanation, q’.”[[14]](#footnote-15)

My notion of grasp that p is similar to Hills’ notion of understanding why p in that it goes beyond mere information and will entail a complex set of abilities. However, you might see understanding why p as looking backwards from p: it requires a grasp of the reasons why p is true and the ability to predict whether p would be true in similar situations. In contrast, grasp of p can be seen as looking forwards from p: it requires a grasp of the significance of p itself and the ability to make complex predictions about the implications of p, both descriptive and normative.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Andreas L. Morgensen has criticized Hills claim that understanding should be seen as a complex set of abilities. He argues that a grasp of explanatory dependence cannot be understood as simply an ability to make appropriate generalisations. “Someone could have the ability to know when a given conclusion follows in a mathematical proof by having in her memory a giant look-up table: there might be no limit to the generality of her ability to test the validity of a proof using this method, and yet she might never be able to see any conclusion as following from a set of premises. Similarly, the ability to see relevant explanatory relationships may be thought of as something more than the mere ability to draw the right conclusions across a sufficiently wide range of relevantly similar cases.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Morgensen argues that this difficulty in analysing what is meant by “understanding” casts doubt on arguments that moral testimony is defective because it conveys knowledge without understanding: “if the claim that morally worthy action requires understanding has to be interpreted using this rarefied sense of understanding, the intuitive plausibility of the claim is put in doubt.”[[17]](#footnote-18)

I find Morgensen’s thought experiment convincing. It seems clear that someone who possesses the ability to make the relevant set of predictions and generalisations merely through using look up tables lacks understanding. However, I do not think this example threatens the usefulness of either Hills’ notion of understanding or my notion of grasp. First, I am not convinced that someone could count as possessing all the relevant abilities through having access to a set of look up tables. Note that Hills requires the subject to be able to “follow an explanation of p given by someone else” and to “explain why p in your own words”. These are not things you can do merely by blindly using look-up tables. In the case of my notion of grasp, the required set of complex predictions about the implications of p, both normative and descriptive, may not be finite. Second, Morgensen’s thought experiment only works because there is a clear, shared intuition that grasp requires more than the ability to look things up in the way he describes. This suggests to me that there is a strong pre-theoretic notion of grasp that distinguishes grasp from mere information. This pre-theoretic notion seems to me to be robust enough to discuss the role that grasp plays in epistemic practice, even if it is difficult to provide precise necessary and sufficient conditions for having a grasp of a proposition.

Errol Lord argues that acquaintance (understood in a wide sense which allows acquaintance through thought experiments) plays an important role in both moral and aesthetic thought. He claims that acquaintance is necessary for appreciative knowledge. Appreciative aesthetic knowledge justifies a host of appropriate responses to a work of art, ranging from emotions of admiration and awe to desires for the work’s preservation and intentions to promote it.[[18]](#footnote-19) Lord argues that for a reason to justify responses in this way, it is not enough to simply be aware of the reason. For a reason to respond in a certain way to justify that response, you must possess it *as a reason*. In order to possess aesthetic reasons as reasons, you need to be acquainted with the aesthetically relevant properties. Appreciative aesthetic knowledge clearly plays an important role in aesthetic practice. Lord argues that appreciative moral knowledge plays a similar key role in moral practice because to act in a morally worthy way is to manifest an ability to use certain facts as reasons to act.[[19]](#footnote-20) Acquaintance with the morally relevant properties puts one in a position to act in a morally worthy way.

Like my notion of grasping p, Lord’s notion of ‘possessing as a reason’ is ‘forward looking’. To grasp p as a reason is to understand some of the implications of p. But I think that there is more to grasping p than simply possessing p as a reason. First, even if we assumed that all ways of understanding the implications of p boil down to having reasons for certain reactions, possessing p as a reason falls short of having a full grasp of p. You could possess p as a reason to Φ without fully grasping why it is a reason to Φ. In addition, if p is a reason to Φ and a reason to ψ, you could possess p as a reason to Φ without possessing it as a reason to ψ. So you could possess p as a reason while missing some of the implications of p. Indeed, there is no reason to assume that the number of reactions for which p is a reason is finite, so for any statable set of reactions {Φ1, Φ2, Φ3,… Φn}, you could possess p as a reason to Φi for each i, while still missing some of the implications of p. But more than this, I don’t want to assume that all ways of grasping the implications of p should be understood as having reasons for certain reactions. At least on the face of it, grasping what it means to destroy a healthy conscious man is, among other things, to understand certain moral truths such as that this is a morally terrible thing. Although we could put this in terms of having reason to react with horror to the possibility of destroying a healthy consciousness, this seems artificial to me.

The distinction between grasp and information is epistemically significant. If I have a grasp of p I am in a better epistemic position than I am if I merely have the information that p: my knowledge of p is better. Moreover, it is typically grasp rather than mere information that is needed for moral reasoning. There are some exceptions: sometimes we have a moral rule which can be applied more of less mechanically, allowing us to deduce a moral conclusion simply from the information that p. But, generally, coming to moral conclusions requires us to have not just the information that a certain proposition is true but also a grasp of what it is for that proposition to be true. We need to understand its descriptive and normative implications. Here we might note that while information might seem to be binary, grasp is a matter of degree. We can ask not just whether a person grasps a given proposition but also how good her grasp is and whether it is better than another person’s grasp. The better a person’s grasp of the relevant knowledge, the better epistemic position she is in to draw moral conclusions.

I suggest that George’s direct acquaintance with the hanging transforms his epistemic position by providing him with both information and grasp that it is extremely difficult to acquire without such direct acquaintance. First, seeing the hanging makes him aware of details that would be difficult to acquire knowledge of through testimony or imagination. He had not imagined that a condemned man would automatically step aside to avoid a puddle. Because of the richness of experience, actual acquaintance provides too much information to be conveyed through testimony or to be easily imagined. But perhaps, more significantly, this face-to-face confrontation allowed George to grasp that capital punishment ends the life of a healthy, conscious person. Although he may have had this information before the hanging, he did not really understand what it meant. He understood neither the descriptive nor normative implications of this fact. After seeing the hanging, he grasped the moral seriousness of ending a human life. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to acquire such a grasp without relevant experience.

Why does acquaintance help us to access this knowledge? I pick out three ideas in the debate about aesthetic testimony pessimism. Without attempting to give a full characterisation of this debate, I want to pick out three common suggestions: (a) that aesthetic testimony is inadequate because aesthetic judgment/ aesthetic appreciation is in some way deeply connected to affective responses[[20]](#footnote-21); (b) that aesthetic testimony is inadequate because aesthetic judgment/ aesthetic appreciation requires knowledge of the particular, determinate qualities of the artwork[[21]](#footnote-22); (c) aesthetic testimony is inadequate because aesthetic judgment/ appreciation is holistic.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Arguments that aesthetic judgment is connected to affective responses have sometimes been rooted in forms of aesthetic relativism or subjectivism.[[23]](#footnote-24) However, one might hold that affective responses are necessary or useful for fully grasping the aesthetic value of a work of art without believing that the work’s value depends upon the subject’s affective responses. On this view, when I look at the Mona Lisa for the first time and am awed by its beauty, it is through this intense emotional reaction that I grasp the painting’s aesthetic value. It is extremely plausible that acquaintance provides a privileged route for these affective responses. Some people may be able to imagine an artwork so precisely that they can have the appropriate reactions through such imagined encounters.[[24]](#footnote-25) Nonetheless, these are unusual cases and require special skills or talents.

Similarly, one might think that George’s acquaintance with the hanging provided him with a grasp of the moral seriousness of capital punishment through generating an affective reaction. The swell of pity and horror he felt showed him what it is to end a life. Most people will not have such strong affective reactions to merely hypothetical examples.[[25]](#footnote-26) It is only by being directly confronted with the situation that George’s emotions are triggered.

The second and third type of defence of aesthetic testimony pessimism are probably most strongly associated with Frank Sibley, who defended pessimism about aesthetic judgment on the basis of a particularism about aesthetics. On Sibley’s view, aesthetic judgment must be a reaction to the particular aspects of the aesthetic object because it is only in virtue of their determinate quality that they merit that reaction: “A thing is graceful in virtue of being curved in exactly the way it is, not just in virtue of being curved. A slightly different curve might not be graceful, and so on.”[[26]](#footnote-27) Sibley also argues for holism in aesthetics. It is all of the aspects of a work of art taken together which determine its aesthetic value[[27]](#footnote-28): “It is always conceivable that, by some relatively small change in line or color in a picture, a note in music, or a word in a poem, the aesthetic character may be lost or quite transformed (though possible also that by some considerable changes it may not be significantly altered).”[[28]](#footnote-29) For this reason, Sibley argued, we cannot deduce the aesthetic value of an object from a mere description: we need to be acquainted with the thing itself.

I don’t want to defend the more controversial aspects of Sibley’s position: I won’t take a stand in this paper on aesthetic testimony pessimism or on whether there can be any general aesthetic principles – although, for what it is worth, I’m inclined to disagree with Sibley on both these issues. Instead, I suggest that we can take two key insights from Sibley while remaining neutral on these larger questions. First, as Lord notes[[29]](#footnote-30), acquaintance puts us in a uniquely good position to engage with aesthetic value in part because it confronts us with the particular. Very small differences in non-aesthetic properties can make an aesthetic difference. These differences can outrun our descriptive abilities. Second, as Lord does not mention aesthetic judgment is holistic.[[30]](#footnote-31) Acquaintance allows us to confront the work of art as a whole and to see how various aspects interact. These interactions are aesthetically relevant. Without acquaintance, it is extremely difficult to understand how the different properties of an artwork interact.

Again, there are important parallels in the moral case. George’s knowledge of the moral seriousness of hanging does not move from general principles about the wrongness of killing sentient, self-aware creatures to the wrongness of killing this particular man. Instead, he learns through his confrontation with this particular instance of killing a healthy man that killing healthy men in general is morally serious. Small details, such as the fact that the man automatically stepped aside to avoid a puddle, seem to play a role in George’s understanding of the value of that man’s life. These details may outrun our descriptive abilities. Certainly, in many cases, there will be morally relevant details that we would not have expected without having seen the case for ourselves. In addition, George’s direct acquaintance with the incident allowed him to see how the different elements of the situation interact. This can be difficult to understand through a simple list of properties or even through attempts to imaginatively place yourself in a situation.[[31]](#footnote-32)

In morality, as in aesthetics, acquaintance provides an epistemic advantage. Appropriate affective reactions can help us to grasp moral truths. Acquaintance provides an epistemic advantage with respect to moral judgments because it is difficult to have the appropriate affective reaction to a hypothetical case. Acquaintance also seems to help us to grasp moral truths by confronting us with details that we would otherwise have overlooked and by helping us to see how the different features of the situation interact.

Nonetheless, moral knowledge can often be acquired without acquaintance. We may be able to acquire moral knowledge through applying appropriate moral principles, through imaginatively extrapolating from our existing experience, or through testimony. Acquaintance is epistemically transformative when it is either very difficult or impossible to acquire moral knowledge through these alternative routes.

I suggest that the primary area of moral knowledge where acquaintance is likely to be epistemically transformative is knowledge of moral *value*. [[32]](#footnote-33) I have deliberately put my arguments in terms of whether a pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her\* foetus gives her knowledge of its moral value rather than its moral status. On my understanding, to assign moral status to an entity is to make certain claims about the rights it has and the duties owed to it. In contrast, to make a judgment about moral value is simply to make claims about the ways in which the entity is morally valuable. Claims about moral status and claims about moral value are often run together, because claims about moral value are normally seen as very quickly implying claims about moral status. Nonetheless, they are logically distinct. We can make judgments about how much, and what type, of moral value an entity has while refraining from drawing conclusions about what rights and duties arise from this value. To help make this clear, consider the analogue in aesthetics: claims about a painting’s aesthetic value (whether it is any good) can be separated from claims about how people are aesthetically required to treat the painting.[[33]](#footnote-34)

There are several reason why acquaintance is more likely to be epistemically transformative with respect to knowledge of moral value than other types of moral knowledge. First, appreciating moral value is the analogue to the core case in aesthetics when acquaintance is relevant: appreciation of the aesthetic value of entities. Indeed, because something may have moral value in part because of its aesthetic value, it seems extremely likely that if acquaintance is necessary for a full grasp of aesthetic value it must also be needed for a full grasp of moral value. Second, knowledge of moral value is very likely to meet the conditions under which acquaintance is epistemically advantageous or even epistemically necessary. Appreciating the moral value of X plausibly requires grasp of what X is like, where this includes a fine-grained appreciation of its qualities and how they interact. In addition, it seems as if knowledge of moral value involves grasp rather than mere information: it makes sense to distinguish between someone who has a full grasp of the moral value of a person and someone who has only a partial grasp.

**Acquaintance with the Foetus as Epistemically Transformative**

Acquaintance can be epistemically transformative when there are significant barriers to gaining moral knowledge through either the application of moral principles or through imagination. I now want to argue that knowledge of the moral value of a human foetus meets these conditions: neither of the key alternative routes to moral knowledge works well in the case of the value of the human foetus.

It has been widely noted in the literature on abortion that there is a problem with using existing moral principles to make claims about the moral status of a human foetus. The standard argument against abortion starts from the principle that “Humans have a right to life” and concludes that, because human foetuses are human, they too must have a right to life. As Mary-Anne Warren notes, this argument involves equivocation. It is undeniable that human foetuses count as human, in some sense. It is also uncontroversial that humans, in some sense, have a right to life. However, it is very unclear whether foetuses count as humans in the morally relevant sense.[[34]](#footnote-35) The principle is normally used to govern conflicts between humans that have already been born. While there are a lot of similarities between human foetuses and humans who are already born, there are also lots of differences. We don’t know how to apply the principle that humans have a right to life to this situation.

This objection has generated a vast literature addressing the moral status of the foetus. We have seen arguments that it is not all humans that have a right to life but rather all persons. It has been argued that persons must be moral agents[[35]](#footnote-36) or have a desire to continue to exist.[[36]](#footnote-37) On the other hand, we have seen arguments that human foetuses have all the rights of already born humans because they have the potential to become adult humans. The nature and moral relevance of potential is hotly disputed.[[37]](#footnote-38)

These arguments about the moral status of the foetus typically proceed in one of two ways. In each case, the goal is to find a principle governing moral status that we know how to apply to the case of the foetus. Some arguments proceed by analogy. First, we are asked to agree that certain groups do have full moral status and that other groups do not. Then, we pick out a feature that all and only the groups with full moral status have. Then we are asked to accept either that foetuses have this feature (and so have full moral status) or that they lack this feature (and so lack full moral status). For a full justification, we would also need some justification of why this feature should make the difference to whether or not an entity has moral status. Other arguments skip the analogy stage and simply try to argue from first principles that humans have full moral status in virtue of a given feature and then show that foetuses do (or do not) have this feature.

Most of these discussions have focused on the moral status of the foetus. I’m primarily interested in knowledge of moral value. But the discussion below should apply to both arguments about moral value and arguments about moral status.

I do not want to deny that such arguments play an important role in assessing the moral status and value of the foetus. Nonetheless, there are serious concerns about using such arguments without acquaintance with a human foetus. The underlying problem is that human foetuses are utterly different from most entities we are familiar with. They are genetically human. In the right circumstances, they become independent human beings. But they are not yet independent human beings. They grow within another human who existed independently before their arrival. They can only be interacted with through that pre-existing human. Nothing else on Earth is quite like a foetus. This means, I suggest, that we should be extremely hesitant about applying principles based on our understanding of the moral status or moral value of other entities to foetuses.

This means, first, that even if our principles are correct for more familiar entities, they may not apply in the same way to foetuses. Suppose having feature F normally gives an entity moral value, V. There may be some other feature, F’ that only ever combines with F in the case of a foetus. It might be that F’ undermines or defeats F, so that having feature F gives an entity moral value, V, except when the entity also has feature, F’. Because foetuses are so different from other entities, without acquaintance with a foetus it is easy to miss possible undermining features. Thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to acquire knowledge of the moral value of a foetus by applying principles.

Second, the unique nature of human foetuses causes a problem for those who aim for reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium requires us to privilege neither appealing general principles nor reactions to particular cases. The aim is to find plausible general principles that explain and justify our most strongly held convictions about particular cases.[[38]](#footnote-39) If we accept the method of reflective equilibrium (as I think we should) then I think we should be wary of endorsing general principles that are supposed to have implications for a key set of cases about which we lack important knowledge. The worry is that if we had more knowledge about these cases, we might have strong convictions that undermined our faith in the general principle. Our inability to be aware of counterexamples within a certain set of cases should not lead us to think that there are no counterexamples in this set of cases. This would be like a tone deaf person accepting a general theory of art works that was supposed to apply to music. The fact that she doesn’t have any conflicting intuitions does not mandate her acceptance of the principle, when we know that (a) she is not in a position to have reliable intuitions and (b) strong conflicting intuitions in this area would undermine the principle.

As I’ll argue below, without acquaintance with a human foetus, we are not in a position to form intuitions about the moral status or value of a human foetus. This means that without such acquaintance, we are not in a position to judge whether a given moral principle deals appropriately with the human foetus. Because the human foetus is a key and unique case, an inability to deal appropriately with this case should be enough to overturn a general principle about moral status or value. This means that we should be hesitant about accepting general moral principles about moral status or value without acquaintance with a human foetus.

My argument that we cannot use thought experiments to judge the moral status or value of a human foetus appeals again to the fact that human foetuses are radically different from most of the entities that we are familiar with, it is very difficult to form an accurate picture of a foetus – or of any relevantly similar entity - without acquaintance. When we attempt to imagine a foetus (or would-be equivalent) there is likely to be information that we miss. We also struggle to grasp the significance of some features and how they interact. Moreover, because it is so difficult to accurately imagine what the foetus/ equivalent entity is like, it will be almost impossible to have the appropriate affective reactions without acquaintance.

Thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the moral value of the foetus either through applying general principles or through thought experiments. This leaves one remaining route to knowledge. Some moral knowledge that is inaccessible through application of general principles and through thought experiments may be accessible through testimony. Can the pregnant woman\*’s knowledge of the moral value of the foetus be conveyed through testimony to someone who has not been pregnant? If so, does this undermine my claim that the pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her\* foetus is epistemically transformative? I suggest not. We must begin by distinguishing between two different types of moral testimony: in ‘pure’ testimony the hearer is simply asked to accept the truth of a moral judgment; in ‘impure’ moral testimony, where the hearer is given reasons to support the moral judgment. There is a significant debate about whether it is possible to gain moral knowledge through ‘pure’ moral testimony. Even if we assume that it is possible, it is clear that the epistemic status of someone who has gained knowledge through pure moral testimony is quite different to the knowledge of those who have gained it more directly. Recall our earlier discussion about the difference between information and grasp. Pure moral testimony appears likely to provide information rather than grasp. Grasp of moral value is particularly difficult to acquire through testimony in the case of the foetus. Given that the foetus is quite different from any entity with which those who have not been acquainted with the foetus are familiar, it may be that its moral value is quite different from the moral value of these familiar things. To grasp the moral value of an entity requires more than simply learning a numerical value. Thus it may be very difficult for someone who has not been acquainted with a foetus to grasp its value through pure moral testimony. Yet it is grasp of moral value rather than simple information about moral value that is required to engage adequately with the ethics of abortion. To engage in this debate, I need to understand what it means for the foetus to have a given moral status. Thus I cannot gain the type of knowledge required to engage in ethical debate about abortion through pure moral testimony about the moral value of the foetus.[[39]](#footnote-40)

In ‘impure’ moral testimony the listener is given reasons to support the moral judgment. I suspect that hearing impure moral testimony about the value of the foetus can provide some grasp of the foetus’ value. Here again we see an analogy with aesthetics. A good critic can allow us some grasp of the aesthetic value of a work of art by highlighting its relevant features. The critic draws on her own acquaintance with the artwork to know which features to pick out and to explain how the different features interact. The extract from Orwell shows this happens with moral knowledge. We are sure that George has gained knowledge of the moral seriousness of hanging through acquaintance, precisely because he is able to convey some of this knowledge to us through his skilful depiction of the hanging.[[40]](#footnote-41) George’s testimony picks out some of the unexpected features that we may have missed and helps us to see their significance. It even allows us to feel some of the appropriate affective responses. Similarly, someone who is acquainted with a foetus can draw upon that acquaintance to know which features to pick out and to explain how the different features interact.

Nonetheless, such explanations may not provide a full grasp of the moral value of the foetus. I argued above that because the foetus is so different from more familiar entities, those who have not been acquainted with it will not be able to accurately imagine it and will find it hard to have the appropriate affective reactions. This is likely to be a problem even if imagination is aided by the testimony of those who have had acquaintance with the foetus. Even after a wonderful description from a sensitive critic, something still changes when I see the Mona Lisa with my own eyes. Even after we have read Orwell’s eloquent words, George is still likely to have a better grasp of the moral seriousness of hanging than us. There is still information that the person with direct acquaintance has, which we lack. We have not seen for ourselves how the different features interact. Our second-hand affective reactions are but pale copies of the real thing. This may lead us to fail to fully grasp the significance of some propositions. This can be seen in the appropriateness of a kind of moral deference to those who have first hand acquaintance. When we try to use this kind of testimony in moral reasoning, we should be open to correction from such sources. We should be alive to the possibility that we have missed some key detail or underestimated the significance of some proposition.

For these reasons, even after a wonderful description from a sensitive pregnant woman\*, I may not be able to fully grasp the moral value of the foetus until I have been acquainted with one. I suggest that acquaintance with the foetus may be epistemically transformativeNARROW: it may well provide access to knowledge which cannot be acquired without that experience.

In addition, even if knowledge of the moral value of the foetus can be conveyed through testimony from those who have been acquainted with it, if this is the only way that those without acquaintance with the foetus can acquire knowledge of the moral value of the foetus, then acquaintance is still epistemically transformativeWIDE. If testimony is the only route to knowledge for those without acquaintance, then acquaintance dramatically transforms the subject’s epistemic status. She\* acquires a special authority. This is most obvious if only pure moral testimony is possible: if she\* cannot convey the reasons for her judgment but only ask her listener to accept the judgment on trust. However, it still holds even if the pregnant woman\* is able to convey some of her reasons to her listener so long as (a) the listener could not otherwise grasp those reasons and/or (b) it is difficult, if not impossible, for the listener to fully grasp the moral value of the foetus.

Thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully grasp the moral value of the foetus either through applying general principles, thought experiments or testimony. Acquaintance with the foetus is epistemically transformative.

**The Pregnant Woman’s Acquaintance with the Foetus**

A pregnant woman\* is not acquainted with her\* foetus’ in quite the same way as I am acquainted with the Mona Lisa when I stand in front of it in the Louvre. She\* cannot see the foetus without external intervention such as an ultrasound, which normally requires the interpretation of a trained technician. She\* cannot normally hear the foetus without a stethoscope. She\* cannot trace the outline of the foetus’s face with her finger.

I understand acquaintance in such a way that you are not required to literally see the foetus in order to count as acquainted with it. Looking at an image can provide many of the epistemic advantages discussed above. So I count looking at an ultrasound as a way of being acquainted with the object. [[41]](#footnote-42)

Does this undermine my claim that pregnancy is epistemically transformative? After all, you don’t have to be pregnant to see an ultrasound of a foetus. No. Not all forms of acquaintance are equal. Someone who has seen the Mona Lisa with her own eyes is better acquainted than someone who has merely seen a photograph. Normally, the better acquainted you are with an object, the stronger your epistemic advantage. A better acquaintance may allow you to have a significantly better understanding of the detailed features of the object and of how these features interact. It may also allow you to have affective responses that are not otherwise possible. This is epistemically transformativeWIDE. The pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her\* foetus provides just such an epistemically transformative acquaintance.

The pregnant woman is not simply acquainted with her foetus through looking at an ultrasound. The pregnant woman\* develops an acquaintance with the foetus through both internal and external means. By internal means of acquaintance with the foetus, I mean the pregnant woman\*’s awareness of the foetus’s presence and movements through her\* awareness of what is happening in her\* own body. This occurs when she\* feels implantation pains or pregnancy sickness, is aware of her\* expanded womb and, most dramatically, when she\* starts to feel the foetus move and kick.

External means of acquaintance include listening to the foetal heartbeat, seeing ultrasound scans, etc. Even when using external means, the pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with the foetus is very different from that of someone who has listened to foetal heartbeats or looked at ultrasound scans. First, the pregnant woman\* develops an ongoing acquaintance with a particular foetus. The external means of acquaintance follow the development of that foetus over time, from the first flickering dot on the ultrasound. Second, the external means are ways of looking at what is happening within her\* own body and these will interact, and sometimes be interpreted by and affect her\* interpretation of, her\* acquaintance with the foetus through internal means.

Because the pregnant woman\* has a multidimensional acquaintance with a particular foetus over time, she\* develops a much more detailed understanding of both the features of the foetus at a given stage and of the development of the foetus over time. This sense of the way the foetus develops over time is crucial to understanding the value of the foetus. To focus simply on what the foetus is like now rather than on what it has been like, what it will be like and the journey in between is to miss crucial aspects of the foetus. Finally, her unique relationship with a particular foetus puts the pregnant woman\* in a position to develop appropriate affective responses which cannot be equalled by looking at ultrasounds of unidentified foetuses. [[42]](#footnote-43) [[43]](#footnote-44)

These internal and external means of acquaintance on their own may not be sufficient to provide an accurate picture of the foetus. In many case, pregnant women\* also gain significant knowledge of the typical development of the human foetus through pregnancy guidebooks etc. I am unsure whether to count this as part of the pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her\* foetus. Very few people will undertake this kind of study of pregnancy unless they or their partner is pregnant. The experience of being pregnant motivates one to learn the biological facts. It makes certain information salient. We see a similar phenomenon when we recognise that people of colour often have a greater factual knowledge about occurrences of racially motivated assault than white people because these facts are more salient to them. It is possible to learn these facts without falling into the relevant group, but the identity / experience still seems relevant to the knowledge. Wherever we draw the boundaries, this information interacts in an important way with the pregnant woman\*’s internal awareness of the foetus and with external means of acquaintance such as ultrasound. It is hard to grasp the significance of this information in the abstract. Pregnant women\*’s grasp of the moral value of the foetus often comes from bringing together their perceptions of the foetus and the information about human biology that they have acquired. This can be thought of as similar to the way an expert in art might draw on their knowledge about brush strokes and history when looking at a painting: neither the acquaintance alone, nor the information alone can replace the informed acquaintance.

I claim that the informed pregnant woman\* is in a privileged epistemic position with respect to the value of the foetus due to her informed acquaintance with the foetus. The informed pregnant woman possesses (a) significant information about the typical development of the human foetus gained from pregnancy guides and other reference works; (b) sustained acquaintance with a particular foetus over time; (c) both internal and external means of acquaintance; (d) a unique relationship with the foetus. This enables her to have an accurate picture of the foetus and to have appropriate affective responses. Many people who have not been pregnant lack all of these features. People who lack all these features will have a very inaccurate picture of the foetus and thus will be in an extremely poor position to judge its moral value. However, some groups of people who have not been pregnant will have some of these features, or something like these features. Is the pregnant woman\* in a better position than these groups to judge the moral value of the foetus?

It is of course possible to acquire the factual knowledge about biological development (meeting condition a) without being pregnant or going anywhere near a pregnant woman\*. Some biologists may have more information than many pregnant women\* about the facts of prenatal human development. Except in very rare cases, knowledge about the facts of development on its own will not enable the agent to accurately picture the human foetus or understand its value. We can know many abstract facts about the foetus, but without acquaintance it will be extremely difficult to put these together and to understand how they interact and what their significance is. I don’t want to rule out the theoretical possibility of someone acquiring an accurate grasp of the foetus and the ability to have appropriate affective responses to it through study alone. However, it would certainly require years of study and an exceptional moral sensibility. I would look at this person somewhat in the light of the deaf composer who can still ‘hear’ the music. They would have to possess special skills and experience that the general population do not have. Because most philosophers writing on the ethics of abortions do not fall into this category, for my practical purposes we can ignore it.

What about experienced midwives who have not themselves been pregnant and partners or co-parents of pregnant women? I think that both these groups have an epistemically transformative acquaintance that provides them with access to knowledge about the value of the foetus. However, because the pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with the foetus is both continuous and involves the interaction between internal and external means of acquaintance, she may have a fuller sense of the foetus’ as a particular individual developing over time. This, plus her unique relationship with the foetus, *may* also put her in a better position to have the full range of appropriate affective responses. I am not here arguing that midwives and prospective co-parents cannot have appropriate affective responses to the developing foetus, just that I would be sympathetic to a pregnant woman claiming that her partner hadn’t and couldn’t *quite* get it. By analogy, someone who has watched a giant manta ray swimming is in a better position to appreciate its wonder than someone who has just read about them, but not in quite a good a position as someone who swum with a manta ray.

**Caveat 1: Fallibility**

A pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with her foetus gives her\* *access* to knowledge about the moral value of the foetus which is very difficult, if not impossible, to acquire without such acquaintance. It does not automatically give her\* knowledge of the value of the foetus. This is exactly what the analogy with aesthetics suggests. Although most people agree that acquaintance with a work of art provides an epistemic advantage when it comes to judging its aesthetic value, few assume that a work of art you automatically know its aesthetic value. Seeing the Mona Lisa may put me in a better position to judge its aesthetic value than I could be in without seeing it, but it does not guarantee that I will judge correctly. I can overestimate a work of art’s aesthetic value because I fail to recognise the ways in which my own intense reactions are the product of my personal relationship with the artwork. I can underestimate a work of art’s aesthetic value because something prevents me from having the appropriate affective responses or because I fail to appreciate the relevant background or because I miss some of the relevant features.[[44]](#footnote-45) Analogously, being acquainted with an entity might put me in a better position to judge its moral value than I could be in without this acquaintance even though acquaintance does not guarantee that I will judge correctly.

So how do we adjudicate between two pregnant women\*’s contradictory claims about the moral value of their foetuses? This is not going to be at all easy, but it is not hopeless. First, responding to pregnant women\*’s epistemic advantages in this area should not mean simply accepting whatever they claim uncritically. The aim here should be critical respect for the pregnant woman\*’s understanding of the value of her foetus. Critical respect often requires dialogue. It requires awareness of the ways in which someone might make mistakes about moral value.

Here I think it is important to distinguish several types of claim:

1. Human foetuses in general have final moral value, M.
2. This particular human foetus has final moral value, M.
3. This particular human foetus has derivative moral value, M.

Our main interest is in claims of Type 1 – claims about the final moral value of human foetuses in general. However, the pregnant woman\* accesses knowledge about general claims about all human foetuses through her\* special access to the moral value of one particular human foetus. Her\* beliefs about the moral value of that particular foetus may well entail beliefs about the moral value of human foetuses in general, but the relationship is not straightforward. It is easy to make mistakes in moving from claims about the moral value of a particular human foetus to claims about the moral value of human foetuses in general. In addition, a foetus often possesses derivative moral value. It may be valuable not for its own sake but because it is incredibly precious to the prospective parents. There is a complicated relationship between claims about what my foetus means to me and claims about the moral value of a foetus for its own sake. Again, beliefs about the derivative moral value of that particular foetus may well entail beliefs about its final moral value, or the final moral value of human foetuses in general.[[45]](#footnote-46) But, again, the relationship is not straightforward and it is easy to make mistakes. Critical respect for the pregnant women\*’s testimony requires us to explore how she is moving between the different types of claim. Conflicts may be resolved by identifying mistakes in these moves - or at the very least, by making explicit the commitments that each claim has about the relationship between the different claims.

Sometimes, we can resolve conflicts about aesthetic judgments by bringing the other person to appreciate features that they may have missed. How does this fit with my claim that acquaintance provides an epistemic advantage by allowing us to see features that might go beyond our descriptive and imaginative powers? Sibley provides an interesting discussion of the various ways in which we can bring another person to appreciate the aesthetic features of a work of art: “Prominent, of course, among these things is drawing attention to the features that are notably responsible for the effect the critic wants his audience to see (‘Notice how the language used here echoes the previous stanza and sets a unity of tone’). But this is far from being the only thing that may bring success; the critic may make similes and comparisons, describe the work in appropriate metaphors, gesticulate aptly, and so on. Almost anything he may do, verbal or nonverbal, can on occasion prove successful.”[[46]](#footnote-47) It is a key part of Sibley’s account that this does not amount to giving reasons to support your judgment, but to helping the other to see for themselves. Sibley calls this ‘perceptual proof’.[[47]](#footnote-48) These kinds of gestures may be used to try to get others to appreciate moral value too. This can work even if the relevant features go beyond our descriptive powers because instead of providing a complete description of the feature in question, they prompt the person who is already acquainted with the object to reflect upon the feature.

There may remain basic disagreements about moral value that resist both these methods of resolution. In the aesthetic case, when two people who have acquaintance with an artwork have a basic disagreement about aesthetic value: a third party who has not seen it normally has to either withhold belief or to make a judgment about which person is the more reliable judge. In the moral case, a third party can also appeal to reflective equilibrium. We are looking for an account that provides the best match between appealing general principles and strongly held convictions about particular cases. This will include an explanation of any mistaken convictions about moral value.

**Caveat 2: Mandatory Ultrasounds**

I also want to stress that this paper does not support mandatory ultrasound laws. Suppose I am right that acquaintance with a foetus through ultrasound is epistemically transformative and puts a woman\* in a better epistemic position to judge the moral value of the foetus and the ethics of abortion. It does not follow that she\* should be required, or indeed pressed, to undergo an ultrasound before being permitted to have an abortion. Philosophy lecturers might hope that an undergraduate degree in philosophy also puts you in a better epistemic position to evaluate the ethics of abortion. No one would suggest that a woman\* should be forced to do an undergraduate degree in philosophy before having an abortion. Such a requirement would make it too difficult to obtain an abortion. The practical cost is too high a price to bear for the epistemic advantage. Similarly, I think that undergoing treatment that is at best invasive, and at worst can make abortion practically inaccessible, is too high a price to bear for the epistemic advantage. Rather than requiring individual women\* to improve their epistemic status by undergoing such a procedure, we should ensure that public and philosophical debate on the ethics of abortion is deeply informed by the voices of women\* who have been pregnant, in a way that recognises the epistemically transformative nature of abortion. This should include the voices of those who have experienced wanted and unwanted pregnancies and those who have carried a pregnancy to term as well as those who have terminated a pregnancy by choice and those who have experienced pregnancy loss.

**Conclusion**

Acquaintance plays a role in knowledge of moral value that is similar to its role in aesthetics. Acquaintance provides an epistemic advantage by helping us to have appropriate affective reactions, confronting us with details that we may otherwise have missed, and by helping us to see how the relevant features interact. Acquaintance is epistemically transformativeWIDE when it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully grasp moral value through thought experiments or applying moral principles. The pregnant woman\*’s acquaintance with the foetus meets these conditions: pregnancy is epistemically transformativeWIDE with respect to the value of the foetus. In addition, although we can acquire some grasp of the value of the foetus through testimony, I may not be able to fully grasp the moral value of the foetus until I have been acquainted with one. There is still information that the person with direct acquaintance has, which we lack. We have not seen for ourselves how the different features interact. Our second-hand affective reactions are but pale copies of the real thing. This may lead us to fail to fully grasp the significance of some propositions. So acquaintance with the foetus may be epistemically transformativeNARROW: it may provide access to knowledge which cannot be acquired without that experience.

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2. I use ‘pregnant woman\*’, ‘pregnant women\*’, ‘she\*’ and ‘her\*’ throughout the paper to acknowledge that not all pregnant persons identify as women without passing over the gendered nature of pregnancy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.); L.A. Paul, ‘What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting’, Res Philosophica, 92 (2) (2015): 1-23. Note that in Paul’s view, the really troublesome cases are those that are not just epistemically transformative but also personally transformative: such experiences do not just provide you with new information, but also change your fundamental preferences (L. A Paul, *Transformative Experience*, p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Woollard, “Mother Knows Best: Pregnancy, Applied Ethics and Epistemically Transformative Experiences”, Unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. To select just a few examples from a vast literature, see Don Marquis, ‘Why Abortion is Immoral’, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 86 (April, 1989), pp. 183-202; Michael Tooley, ‘Abortion and Infanticide’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 37-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. There is a vigorous debate surrounding aesthetic testimony, but this debate tends to focuses on question of whether you can gain any aesthetic knowledge through testimony. For good overview, see Robson 2012 and Livingstone. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. There is a lively debate about the validity of moral testimony but this debate focuses on pure moral testimony, in which a subject is expected to accept moral statements without being told why those statements are true. For a good summary see Alison Hills, “Moral Testimony”, Philosophy Compass 8/6 (2013): 552–559, 10.1111/phc3.12040 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Errol Lord, “How To Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Testimony”, provisionally forthcoming in Oxford Studies in Metaethics, p. 25 of author’s copy. Note that Lord is clearly alive to possible differences between acquiring moral knowledge through thought experiment and acquiring knowledge through acquaintance more narrowly construed – for example, he discusses the importance of engagement with the physical in moral thinking (p. 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Orwell, 2000, pg. 45. Quoted in Lord, “How To Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Testimony”, p. 12 of author’s copy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Someone might dispute Orwell’s conclusion that capital punishment is wrong – and thus dispute that this belief counts as knowledge. It is for this reason that I focus on the claim that George has gained knowledge about the moral seriousness of killing. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Alison Hills, “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology”, Ethics, Vol. 120, No. 1 (October 2009), p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Alison Hills, “Moral Testimony”, Philosophy Compass 8/6 (2013), p. 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See Andreas L. Mogensen, “Moral Testimony Pessimism and the Uncertain Value of Authenticity”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, for criticism of Hills’ notion of understanding. Morgensen argues that (a) it does not make sense to put understanding in terms of ability because we can think of chinese room type cases where the ability is there but understanding is lacking; (b) the idea of understanding is now so vague as to be useless. I’m inclined to see this as showing that grasp should be understood as entailing abilities but not limited to those abilities – but I am not convinced that our inability to specify it more precisely means that it is now useless. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “Moral Testimony Pessimism and the Uncertain Value of Authenticity”, Andreas L. Mogensen, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Morgensen, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Lord, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Most famously Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J. H. Bernard. (New York: Dover, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Most famously, Sibley “Particularity, Art and Evaluation”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian society, Supp Vol. 48 (1974); Sibley, Aesthetic/ Non-aesthetic, The Philosophical Review 74 (1965) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Sibley, Aesthetic/ Non-aesthetic, The Philosophical Review 74 (1965); Goldman ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value.’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.3 (2006): 333–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See Lord’s discussion of missing artworks (Lord, “How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality Through Acquaintance and Testimony”, p. 25.) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Of course, there are hypothetical examples and hypothetical examples. As Martha Nussbaum argues, engagement with literature can enable us to have emotional reactions that would not be possible from merely reading a standard philosophical thought experiment. See, for example, Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Sibley, “Particularity, Art and Evaluation”, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Goldman also famously draws on holism to defend aesthetic testimony pessimism. However, Goldman combines holism with the possibility of radically divergent non-defective sensibilities. I do not want to defend radically divergent non-defective moral sensibilities, so Goldman’s account of aesthetic testimony pessimism cannot be used as a model for my argument that acquaintance provides unique access to knowledge about moral value. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Sibley, “Aesthetic/ Non-aesthetic”, The Philosophical Review 74 (1965), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Lord, “How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality Through Acquaintance and Testimony”, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Sibley, Aesthetic/ Non-aesthetic, The Philosophical Review 74 (1965); Goldman ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value.’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.3 (2006): 333–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Jennifer Church argues that imagination can help us to acquire knowledge in part by providing a holistic picture in which we can work through how we expect the different elements to interact (“Perceiving People as People: An overlooked role for the imagination”, Knowledge through imagination, p. 177). However, see Heidi Maibon for discussion of the flaws of human imagination, in particular focalism (the tendency not to focus on the most obvious factors and not take into account other effects (“Knowing Me, Knowing You”, *Knowledge Through Imagination*). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. The Orwell example is not restricted to knowledge about moral value: George draws conclusions about the moral seriousness of killing and about the wrongness of capital punishment. However it does seem as if moral value is playing a foundational role here. It seems to be George’s recognition of the Burmese prisoner’s value that underpins his judgment that it is so wrong to kill him. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. “Reasons first” accounts argue that claims of value should be understood in terms of what agents have reason to do. I think that we may still be able to distinguish moral value from moral status on such accounts, because moral status is typically a matter of the rights an entity has to be treated a certain way and the (possibly defeasible) duties others have to treat the entity a certain way. Inference is requires to move from what reasons an agent has to act in a certain way to what (possibly defeasible) duties she or he has. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Warren, M. (1973) “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion”, *The Monist* 57. Reprinted in: LaFollette, H. (2007) (ed), *Ethics in Practice*: Third Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, P. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. See, for example, Warren, M. (1973) “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion”, *The Monist* 57. Reprinted in: LaFollette, H. (2007) (ed), *Ethics in Practice*: Third Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. (This slightly oversimplifies Warren’s view.) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. See Michael Tooley, *Abortion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. For discussion see Michael Tooley, *Abortion* and Jeff McMahan *The Ethics of Killing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Although reflective equilibrium is of course most strongly associated with Rawls, I particularly like Brad Hooker’s presentation in, for example, Brad Hooker, ‘Ross-style Pluralism versus Rule-consequentialism', *Mind*, 105, 1996, pp. 531–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. As noted above, Alison Hills and Errol Lord also argue that pure moral testimony does not allow the hearer to engage with moral knowledge in ways that are important parts of moral practice. Hills argues that pure moral testimony can provide knowledge of moral truths but not an understanding of the reasons for those truths. She claims that understanding why moral truths hold is required for true virtue. Lord argues that pure moral testimony does not allow us to have moral reasons as reasons which is needed for us to have the full range of appropriate reactions to moral truths. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. I thank Aaron Ridley for pressing me on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. I count the pregnant woman\* as becoming acquainted with the foetus through looking at ultrasound images. This may appear to require me to take a stand on a significant debate within aesthetics. The debate concerns whether in looking at a photograph of, say, a bunch of flowers, I see the bunch of flowers or merely a representation of them. According to the Transparency Thesis, when looking at a photograph, I do see the flowers because the photograph is transparent. It is something that we look through, just as those who are short sighted might look through a pair of glasses. It might seem as if to claim that the pregnant woman\* is acquainted with the foetus, I must hold that ultrasounds are transparent. Given that ultrasound images may seem like extremely difficult to interpret photography, this might seem to commit me to the Transparency Thesis in general. It might be possible to argue that ‘live’ ultrasounds are transparent without accepting the Transparency Thesis in general. Unlike photographs, live ultrasounds do seem to provide some of what Gregory Currie calls ‘egocentric information’ about how the image is related to the viewer in space and time. (Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science (Cambridge University Press,* Cambridge1995), p. 66.) However, this argument is not crucial for me. My key point about acquaintance does not require me to hold that ultrasound images are transparent. I understand acquaintance in such a way that you are not required to literally see the foetus in order to count as acquainted with it. Looking at an image can provide many of the epistemic advantages discussed above. So I count looking at an ultrasound as a way of being acquainted with the object. Lord gives a similar response to the objection that his account of the role of acquaintance in morality and aesthetics requires him to endorse direct realism about perception. Lord, “How To Learn”, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Catherine Mills argues that ultrasound images “work to establish and ethical relationship with the foetus” through their affective and emotive impact on our intuition. ((2008) Images and Emotion in Abortion Debates, The American Journal of Bioethics, 8:12, 61-62, DOI: 10.1080/15265160802559187). For sociological evidence showing that ultrasound imaging improves women\*’s ability to picture their baby and increases their understand of the pregnancy as ‘real’ see Rita Beck Black, “Seeing the Baby: The Impact of Ultrasound Technology” Journal of Genetic Counseling, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1992); E.-K. JI, D. H. PRETORIUS, R. NEWTON, K. UYAN, A. D. HULL, K. HOLLENBACH and T. R. NELSON, “Effects of ultrasound on maternal-fetal bonding: a comparison of two- and three-dimensional imaging”, *Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol* 2005; 25: 473–477 and S. Campbell, A. E. Reading, D. N. Cox, C. M. Sledmere, R. Mooney, P. Chudleigh, J. Beedle & H. Ruddick (1982) Ultrasound scanning in pregnancy: The short- term psychological effects of early real-time scans, Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology, 1:2, 57-61, DOI: 10.3109/01674828209081226. The latter is a fascinating paper from the early days of ultrasound technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Although I argue that the pregnant woman\* is acquainted with the foetus through ultrasound, I do not want to imply that this acquaintance is unproblematic. For example, Lisa M. Mitchell points out the ways in which the mediated nature of ultrasound may affect the pregnant woman\*’s understanding of her foetus. Ultrasounds are (normally) performed by third parties. The choices made about what to show and the guidance given about how to interpret the images frames how we see the foetus. In addition, having an ultrasound, like many other aspects of pregnancy is not experienced fresh, but from within a cultural framework that influences the meaning we give to what we see and feel. (Mitchell, Lisa M. 2001. Baby’s first picture: Ultrasound and the politics of fetal subjects. London: University of Toronto Press, 697) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. See Sibley 141 on how can we can miss aesthetic features. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. See, for example, Lindsey Porter for an interesting argument that taking seriously grief caused by miscarriage is incompatible with holding that foetuses lack final moral value (Porter, “Miscarriage and Person Denying.” JOURNAL of SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY, Vol. 46 No. 1, Spring 2015, 59–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Sibley “Aesthetic/ Non-Aesthetic”, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)