**WHERE DOES MORAL KNOWLEDGE COME FROM?**

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Sarah McGrath has written a wonderful book.[[1]](#footnote-1) She takes as a starting point, what many moral epistemologists do not grant, that there is a great deal of moral knowledge, and that it is hardly the unique possession of moral philosophers or even adults. One needn’t engage in sophisticated reflection about the extent to which one’s belief that rape is immoral squares with one’s views about individual cases and general moral principles in order to know that rape is indeed immoral. We shouldn’t overintellectualize moral knowledge. And the comparison with non-moral knowledge is always close at hand. We know that there are books on the shelf in front of us even without having to reflect on the extent to which that belief squares with our other beliefs. One excellent feature of this book is the way in which it is able to navigate so many important issues about moral epistemology without having to take a position on various controversial debates in epistemology generally or in the muddy waters of the metaphysics of ethics. For example, without taking a stand on whether fundamental moral truths are knowable a priori, McGrath persuasively argues that we often gain knowledge of such truths empirically. The majority of McGrath’s attention is focused on the very large and robust phenomenon of everyday moral knowledge, and her careful and commonsensical discussion of the many ways in which we regularly come to gain moral knowledge is terrifically revealing.

I want to focus attention here on my title question: Where does moral knowledge come from? McGrath’s discussion makes clear repeatedly just how important this question is. She is rightly critical of a standard understanding of the method of reflective equilibrium. As she notes,

…to the extent that there is a genuine philosophical puzzle about ‘where moral knowledge comes from,’ or how we could acquire such knowledge in the first place, ‘the method of reflective equilibrium’ is not a good candidate for an answer to that puzzle. This is because the capacity of reflective equilibrium to deliver new moral knowledge typically depends on the reasoner’s already having substantial moral knowledge from other sources. (17)

Thus, even if reflecting on our moral beliefs and their interrelations can serve to extend our moral knowledge, it can’t be a complete account of the source of such knowledge. As McGrath points out, “In moral inquiry, *we never start from scratch*.” (18) If our minds are already typically well-stocked with a good deal of moral knowledge by the time we are in a position to engage in any reflection on moral matters, the question then arises as to what the source or sources of that unreflective moral knowledge might be.

McGrath has a good deal to say about this. There is an exceptionally illuminating chapter devoted to the ways in which moral knowledge is often a product of observation. One needn’t think that moral truths are directly observable in order to recognize the many routes by which contingent features of the world provide us with good reason to believe moral claims. Important here as well is McGrath’s discussion of the ways in which we may gain moral knowledge from others. I want to raise an issue about a potential source of moral knowledge, however, which McGrath does not address in any detail.

McGrath expresses some sympathy with what Alex Byrne[[2]](#footnote-2) would call an *economical* account of our moral knowledge.

Byrne usefully distinguishes between ‘extravagant’ and ‘economical’ accounts of our knowledge of a given domain. An account is *extravagant* just in case it invokes a special purpose, dedicated faculty or capacity in accounting for our knowledge of the relevant subject matter, on the grounds that more general purpose capacities are inadequate to deliver such knowledge. In contrast, an account is *economical* just in case it holds that our knowledge of the subject matter is delivered by general purpose epistemic capacities, capacities that also deliver knowledge of distinct subject matters… In terms of this dichotomy, the arguments of this book tend to support (to the extent that they are successful) an economical as opposed to an extravagant account of our moral knowledge. (5, n. 5)

The Chomskian account of language acquisition is, famously, extravagant, while a behaviorist account of language acquisition is economical.

Let us now consider a familiar sort of case in which someone is doling out helpings of a pie among a number of eager diners. The server carves out roughly equal-sized servings of pie for each of the others, but a much, much larger piece for himself. Without having to stop to reflect, each of those other diners immediately come to believe that this isn’t fair.

How did they arrive at this belief? An extravagant account might have it that we have a native capacity to recognize fair distributions. Our fairness detectors do not aid in the recognition of non-moral features of the world, any more than the Chomskian language acquisition device allows for the acquisition of non-linguistic capacities. These fairness detectors need not, of course, be infallible. A plausible extravagant theory would have it, however, that such detectors may be quite reliable within a certain range of normal environments. In particular, they might be reliable enough to provide us with a good deal of moral knowledge. More than this, the moral beliefs which result from our fairness detectors might provide important input to self-conscious theorizing, theorizing which, under sufficiently congenial conditions, would allow us to refine our judgments about fairness in ways which are both more fine-grained than the initial outputs of the detectors allow for, and more accurate as well. The unaided operation of our fairness detectors would thus produce a good deal of moral knowledge; when combined with our general capacity to theorize and systematize beliefs on any topic whatever, these detectors would play an ineliminable role in the production of still further moral knowledge.

An ambitious extravagant theory of moral knowledge might populate the mind with a number of detectors for moral properties jointly comprising a faculty of moral knowledge. A case would need to be made for each of the different sorts of detectors, explaining why more economical accounts of the sources of moral knowledge fail to square with our abundant moral perspicacity. Such a theory would offer an answer to the question of where our moral knowledge comes from, and it would serve to fill out McGrath’s criticism of reflective equilibrium accounts. Reflective equilibrium accounts leave out something important, something without which our capacity for theorizing would not lead to moral belief or moral knowledge. The extravagant theory would explain why it is, as McGrath nicely puts it, that moral inquiry never starts from scratch.

I think that McGrath is wrong to believe that the arguments of her book support an economical theory of moral knowledge rather than an extravagant theory of the sort just described. What she does show—and this is no small thing—is that there are a great many routes to moral knowledge by way of testimony and by way of observation. She discusses, for example, how discovering that a person one regards as a decent human being regularly engages in behavior one had antecedently thought of as immoral may serve as evidence that the behavior is not, in fact, immoral. This is an important point, and it illuminates an often overlooked feature of our everyday moral lives. But this example, and many others like it which McGrath discusses, capture our moral thinking *in medias res*. And just as McGrath rightly notes that a reflective equilibrium account of the source of moral knowledge fails to address where moral knowledge ultimately comes from, the same, it seems, is true here. For this reason, I don’t believe that the arguments in this book support an economical theory of moral knowledge. They certainly don’t count against such a theory, but, as I see it, they leave the question of whether we should favor an economical theory or an extravagant theory completely open.

This is related to McGrath’s discussion of what she calls *The Caricaturized Moral Intuitionist.*

The Caricaturized Moral Intuitionist holds that our ability to arrive at moral knowledge depends entirely on the operation of an occult, *sui generis* faculty of moral intuition, and no account of moral inquiry that neglects to mention the central role of this faculty could possibly be adequate… The Caricaturized Moral Intuitionist holds that this faculty, like the more familiar five senses, is a *fallible* source of information, although it is generally reliable when used in hospitable circumstances and regularly provides us with knowledge both of general principles and particular moral claims. (14-5)

Now if we leave out the reference to the faculty of moral intuition as *occult*, this is just the view that we should endorse an extravagant moral epistemology, as McGrath notes. (15, n. 5) Unfortunately, McGrath offers little discussion of this view, other than to claim that it “offers us a badly inadequate moral epistemology, for we have no special faculty of moral intuition.” (16) What is needed at this point is a discussion of the psychological literature relevant to this question.

McGrath mentions this literature only in a brief footnote in which she remarks that the claim that we gain substantial moral knowledge from our social environment even before we’re in a position to engage in reflection “is consistent with the possibility that typical human beings have some innate moral knowledge, a possibility I take to be a live one. At least some developmental psychologists argue that human infants as young as three months manifest moral beliefs in experimental settings.” (59, n. 1) Notice, however, that the suggestion that there is innate moral knowledge is just one version of an extravagant moral theory. One might, instead, offer a view, as I did above, on which there is an innate moral faculty which allows us to reliably form judgments about moral situations we face even if it does not provide us with innate moral knowledge. Much of the psychological literature on moral belief, as I understand it, is more congenial to a view of this sort than to the view that there is innate moral knowledge.

Thus, consider Michael Tomasello’s account of the emergence of a capacity for moral belief out of a capacity for joint intentionality and collective intentionality.[[3]](#footnote-3) Tomasello provides an account of how a capacity for moral judgment might have evolved out of simpler capacities for cooperative behavior. Like Tomasello, Leimgruber, Rosati, and Santos argue that there are the beginnings of moral belief in other species.[[4]](#footnote-4) These are but two examples of a very large body of literature which is relevant here. The connection between a capacity for simple cooperative activity and the origins of a capacity for moral belief is widely examined, and it promises to illuminate our understanding of where moral beliefs come from. This literature allows us to extend the account McGrath provides in ways which deepen our appreciation of the roots of moral knowledge.

Let me give one brief illustration of an important implication of this work. Harry Frankfurt offered an explanation of a crucial difference, as he saw it, between humans and non-human animals.[[5]](#footnote-5) Adult human beings are capable of reflecting on our desires, while other animals, he claimed, are not. This capacity for second-order desire allows us to stand back from our first-order desires and decide which of them we wish to act upon. It is this capacity which allows for freedom of the will, and it explains, on Frankfurt’s view, why it is that we may hold adult human beings responsible for their behavior, but do not, and should not, hold young children and other animals responsible for theirs. The literature on the origins of moral belief, however, fully supports McGrath’s contention that reflection is unnecessary for moral knowledge, and insofar as it provides evidence of moral belief in young children and some non-human animals, it leaves ample room for an account of responsibility which sees such creatures, and not just adult human beings, as responsible for at least some of their behavior. No one suggests that non-human animals are capable of the range of moral belief and perceptiveness that adult human beings are, so the suggestion here is not that such animals are fully responsible for the entire range of their behavior. Their responsibility, however, is limited by their capacity for moral knowledge, on this view, rather than their capacity to reflect on their first-order mental states. It seems to me that a view of this sort is worthy of exploration, and pushing our investigation of the sources of moral knowledge into its psychological bases is likely to open up a range of possibilities such as this which we would not have even considered were we to theorize about moral knowledge without digging deeper into its psychological origins in this way.

It is a real virtue of McGrath’s work that, aside from its many more direct achievements, it points the way toward lines of research such as this which she does not develop in this book. Let me give one additional example of this sort. Would-be moral reformers often face the difficult psychological task of convincing the large majority of their community to give up certain deeply held moral beliefs. McGrath makes the very important point that, significant as this psychological problem is, there is a substantial epistemological issue here as well. The opinions of one’s peers, when they conflict with one’s own opinions, provide reasons for doubt. When a substantial majority of one’s peers disagree with one, other things being equal, this may provide very strong reason for thinking that one has erred. But the moral reformer is often in exactly this position. (9, 133-4) It is quite simply beyond belief that moral reformers are one and all irrational in their firmly held moral opinions. But now we need an explanation of how it is that would-be reformers, in the face of such substantial counterevidence, may hold justified beliefs and even knowledge. McGrath raises this issue, although she does not take this project on. In this, as in so many other things, this book is likely to be a stimulus for further important projects in moral epistemology well into the future.

1. *Moral Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 2019. All page references in the text are to this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Transparency and Self-Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *A Natural History of Human Morality*, Harvard University Press, 2016; and *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny*, Harvard University Press, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kristin Leimgruber, Alexandra Rosati, and Laurie Santos, “Capuchin monkeys punish those who have more,” *Evolution and Behavior*, 37(2016), 236-244. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” reprinted in his *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 11-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)