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The Predicament of Moral Epistemology

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Abstract

Moral epistemology (henceforth ME) has been spoken of as a subject matter in its own right by philosophers in the last few decades and yet the delineation of ME as a sub-discipline remains uncharted. Many eminent scholars with rich contributions have not explicitly defined the scope or demarcation of this emerging field. Drawing from their writings, the paper tries to show that philosophers working on ME either conceptualise it as an application of epistemology to moral beliefs or as encompassing issues of epistemic access to moral truths. The paper contends that such conceptions of moral epistemology are not rigorous enough to warrant a discrete sub-discipline. This puts the paper in disagreement with those scholars who justify the creation of a subject-specific ME. David Copp and Todd Stewart figure prominently among such attempts. Copp and Stewart justify ME to be a separate epistemology, by alluding to the normative nature of moral beliefs, and through the introduction of emotions into the mix, respectively. The paper tries to show that neither normativity nor emotions appear to be robust enough to create a distinct epistemology. The predicament of moral epistemologists arises from the fact that while the practitioners seem to be keen on establishing ME as a discrete sub-discipline, they end up subsuming it under a general epistemology and fail to justify the need for such a subject-specific epistemology. The only way out of this quandary, the paper asserts, is to treat ME more as a methodological project that involves extending general epistemic tools to moral beliefs as a specific case, and not as a specialised topic-specific epistemology.

Keywords Moral epistemology · Metaethics · Moral beliefs

> *It is possible to doubt whether there is such a subject as moral epistemology, and I am conscious of some misgivings over both words. Perhaps "moral" is not quite right, for one might be concerned with the larger sphere of values in general. And perhaps "epistemology" is not quite right either (Blackburn 1996: 82).*

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Introduction

Moral epistemology (henceforth ME) has been spoken of as a subject matter in its own right by philosophers in the last few decades (Venturinha 2016) and is now considered to include enquiries throughout the history of ethics right from Plato to Moore.[1] Given such ambitions, it becomes pertinent to demarcate the boundaries of this new sub-discipline. However, this delineation has not quite attracted the attention of scholars considered to be working in this area.[2] Many eminent scholars like Audi and Sinnott-Armstrong with rich contributions have not explicitly defined the scope or demarcation of this emerging field. However, it is possible to draw out from their writings, their conceptions of ME. In the first section of the paper, I attempt such an endeavour to extract implicit conceptions of these scholars regarding ME. I try to show that philosophers working on ME either view it as an application of epistemology to moral beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong 2007) or in terms of encompassing epistemic issues of access to moral truths (Audi 1997). It is my contention that both such conceptions of moral epistemology are not rigorous enough and do not seem to warrant a discrete sub-discipline. In the second section, I consider the arguments of a few scholars like Copp (1991), Stewart (2007), and Jones (2008) who argue for a conceptual demarcation of moral epistemology. Copp asserts that normativity of moral propositions is the distinguishing feature of moral beliefs and hence moral epistemology can be differentiated from non-moral epistemology; Stewart points to the role of emotions in the appraisal of moral judgments and Jones focuses on certain 'disanalogies' between moral and non-moral enquiries to justify the creation of a specialised epistemology. It is my contention that none of these arguments seems to be robust enough to create a distinct epistemology. The claim then is that the demarcation of the subject matter is neither clear in practice of moral epistemologists nor in the theoretical conceptualisation of a handful of scholars who attempt it. In the last section, I propose a way out of this quandary by treating ME more as a methodological project that involves extending general epistemic tools to moral beliefs as a specific case, and not as a specialised topic-specific epistemology.

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[1] For instance, Gentzler (2005) argues that investigating whether Plato was committed to intuitionism would amount to revisiting his ME. According to Rhonheimer, Aristotle responds to the problem of ME through his enquiry into the question of "which are the conditions for human beings to both understand and pursue what is truly good?" in *Nichomachean ethics* (Rhonheimer 2012: 884). Jonathan Harrison argues that Hume is interested in the question of "How do we know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice?" in various works and that there is enough coherence in his arguments that merits an assimilation and a separate discussion under the category of ME (Harrison 1976: vii). Kant is also considered to have discussed issues pertaining to ME when he argues that basic moral truths are *knowable* a priori (Audi 1991: 4).

[2] Scholars often are found to be casual even while providing a definition of ME. For instance, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong talks of ME along with moral linguistics, and moral ontology as "*yet another* area of metaethics" (Sinnott-Armstrong 1996: 4). In the same breath, he also refers to ME as "*simply epistemology* applied to substantive moral claims" (Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons 1996: 5) (emphasis added).

I

The array of philosophers working on ME can be exhaustively classified into two groups, for our purpose: Those who give priority to moral justification and knowledge and those who give priority to moral truths. The former treats ME as an application of epistemology to moral beliefs while the latter treats the task of ME as concerning epistemic access to moral facts. I would like to call philosophers belonging to the first group, as pursuing 'justification-first' ME. Justification-first moral epistemologists portray ME as being exhausted by epistemology and as a branch of epistemology. More importantly, they believe that the challenges faced by epistemologists in the moral domain find parallels in the non-moral domains also. Hence, moral justification, moral scepticism, moral disagreement come across as their chief concerns. Some exemplars of the first approach towards ME are Noah Lemos, Aaron Zimmerman, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Lemos considers ME to be dealing with questions regarding "whether and how we can have knowledge or justified belief" about moral issues (Lemos 2005: 479). Thus, knowability and justifiability of moral beliefs become the chief concerns for Lemos in ME. He argues that the problem of reliability of moral beliefs or perhaps justification too is not unique to moral philosophy; instead both should be "viewed as a particular instance of that broader issue familiar to epistemology in general" (Lemos 2005: 507). For Zimmerman, ME in the broadest sense is "the study of whether and how we know right from wrong" (Zimmerman 2010: 1). Zimmerman seems to imply that under ME, one undertakes epistemological enquiries regarding moral and immoral actions, virtues and vices, the nature of rights and duties and so on and. He writes:

> As moral epistemologists we are concerned with knowledge and ignorance regarding the morally right thing to do; the way to arrive at justified or well-grounded beliefs as to which actions and institutions are just; an enumeration of the sort of psychological maladies and sociological conditions that result in an improper appreciation of the viciousness of cruelty; and so on for each such combination of the many things separately investigated by mainstream epistemologists and moral philosophers (Zimmerman 2010: 2).

Thus, when for Lemos, all enquiries in ME can be reduced to enquiries in epistemology, Zimmerman seems to indicate a close parity between epistemology and ME. Throwing more light on this parity, Zimmerman argues that epistemology and moral philosophy are not two diverse fields that have been superficially brought together in ME. There is a shared structure of enquiries in both the fields. In moral philosophy, there's a preliminary level of enquiry that merely aims at describing the motivations and actions of agents. Then, there's a possibility of critically appraising the motivations and actions of agents.[3] One can also think of a second level of enquiry (in the light of the diversity in our moral appraisals and differences in moral evaluations) that evaluates the standards and rules by which we conduct our moral

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[3] To call actions as morally right, to condemn certain agents for their behaviours, are examples of activities taking place at this first level of enquiry.

appraisal. Similarly, in epistemology, we have a preliminary level of enquiry which deals with descriptions of the beliefs we hold. The first level of enquiry here would be the evaluation of these beliefs and an analysis of the conditions under which we can say that one *knows* that something is the case. It is also possible to enquire on what grounds we tend to call some opinions as ignorant, unjustified or warranted. Lastly, a second-level enquiry would critically evaluate the first-level evaluations.[4] Zimmerman presumes that the analysis applicable to moral beliefs can also be relevantly applied to beliefs that have non-moral content and holds the subject of ME to be a species of epistemology. For example, most of us believe that on being provided sufficient evidence, it is possible for a person to *know* that the earth is round. Similarly, Zimmerman argues that it is possible after adequate training (as in the case of children) that an individual can *know* that *murder is wrong*. Thus, a first-level epistemological enquiry can contain in its domain, the first-level moral epistemological enquiry and the second-level epistemological investigation will encompass moral beliefs that were dealt with, in the first level. Thus, according to this view, ME is a genuine line of enquiry only if "we have moral beliefs that are relevantly like our non-moral beliefs" (Zimmerman 2010: 13).

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong holds that ME deals with "epistemic status of our substantive moral beliefs" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2007: 2). He pithily says:

> Moral epistemology is simply epistemology applied to substantive moral claims and beliefs. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justification in general. It asks whether, when, and how claims or beliefs can be justified or known or shown to be true. Moral epistemology then asks whether, when, and how substantive moral beliefs and claims can be justified or known or shown to be true (Sinnott-Armstrong 1996: 5).

One can see that Sinnott-Armstrong's position is closer to Zimmerman's than with Lemos'. The former duo explains ME in terms of application of epistemology to moral philosophy. Even while giving importance to epistemology, they seem to suggest that the field ME emerges when moral philosophy is subjected to epistemic parameters. Lemos, as mentioned earlier, can be said to think in terms of reducing ME to epistemology.

Alison Jaggar and Theresa Tobbin argue that traditional models of moral justification have been conceived analogous to how philosophers conceptualise accounts of scientific methods. If relying on scientific methods constitutes doing science, then reliance on good methods of moral reasoning becomes constitutive of ME. Further, a moral claim that is justified through good reasoning is considered to be morally authoritative. Jaggar and Tobbin also seem to draw an analogy between moral reasoning on one hand and scientific and other non-moral reasonings. Thus, they argue that-

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[4] Examples of such enquiries are: Is there inconsistency in our judgments about what constitutes knowledge? Can there be cases where people fail to know even when we common-sensically tend to credit them with knowing?

> [A]lthough good scientific methods and sound legal procedures are fallible, they provide our best means of justifying empirical claims and for determining legal liability. Similarly, our best available moral reasoning provides the most authoritative guide we have for morally appropriate action (Jaggar and Tobin 2013: 385)

It is fair to say that the justification-first moral epistemologists we have looked at so far, see ME firmly ensconced in epistemology. They perceive morality as a body of knowledge that can be investigated and systematic study of morality to be concerned with such issues as how or whether moral claims can be rationally justified. To sum up, they assume that epistemological tools and methods applicable in the non-moral domains can be reliably applied to moral beliefs as well. This implicitly amounts to a claim that there are no unique, exclusive epistemological issues in the moral sphere. However, if there is indeed nothing distinctive about our treatment of moral beliefs vis-à-vis non-moral beliefs, there is hardly any warrant to coin the phrase and consider this as a sub-discipline. The case for paying ME any special philosophical attention is thus significantly undermined by such an approach by justification-first moral epistemologists.

Philosophers who give importance to moral facts, moral truths are doing what I call truth-first moral epistemology. They tend to have specific ontological positions regarding the status of moral truths and use ME instrumentally to justify their metaphysical positions. These scholars tend to be predominantly cognitivists and further, a majority of them subscribe to Moral realism. For example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord and David Brink use ME to answer epistemological challenges to the concept of moral facts. The question of moral facts and how we have epistemic access to moral facts is of primary concern to them. As Simon Kirchin puts it in another context, such philosophers believe that the way to have a plausible epistemology is by first having a plausible metaphysics (Kirchin 2012).

Sayre-McCord argues that the difference between the justification of moral and non-moral beliefs is not one of kind, and although a few non-moral beliefs might be more justified than general moral beliefs, it is certainly true that at least some moral beliefs could have the same level of epistemic justification as some of our non-moral beliefs. Therefore, he aims to defend, without any special attention to moral beliefs,

> [A] theory of the epistemic justification of belief that applies across the board to all of our beliefs…. So far as I can see, the epistemic evaluation of our moral beliefs is of a piece with that of all our other beliefs; there is no distinctive epistemology of moral beliefs (Sayre-McCord 1996: 138).

The last sentence appears particularly illuminating for us because Sayre-McCord is arguing that general theories of epistemic justification can be reliably applied to moral domains. Clearly, he does not feel that tackling these unique features requires a distinctive epistemology as such. William Lycan too echoes a similar sentiment when he asserts that "I do maintain that if moral facts are in trouble, then so are facts of any other sort that seem supervenient but are not yet uncontroversially reduced…" (Lycan 1986: 91). Moral realists like Michael Quirk and Jonathan Dancy portray ME to be traditionally involved with epistemic access to the truth of the normative

beliefs that realists hold. Although justification of such moral beliefs would be one of the concerns of moral realists, it seems that their ontological commitments come prior to their epistemological enquiries. Dancy holds that ME can only emerge after we assume (1) that there are moral facts about which actions are right and wrong and (2) that moral agents have beliefs about such moral facts (Dancy 2010). With these assumptions in place, ordinary epistemological questions regarding *knowing* a moral fact, structure of moral justification, and moral scepticism become enquiries pertaining to ME. David Enoch too assumes that our moral beliefs are about an independent order of moral facts and then asks how is it that we know about them? Only when the above question was answered, would the issue of justification of these beliefs arise. For both Dancy and Enoch then, epistemology is not intrinsic to their discourse (Enoch 2011). Michael Quirk asserts that ME is a critical investigation of "whether there are objective moral facts, whether moral statements strictly admit of truth or falsity" (Quirk 2004); indicating that ME, for him, is a *means* for establishing/denying moral facts or for proving/disproving objectivity of moral norms.

Platts (1979) like Sayre-McCord, while accepting that moral beliefs are bound up with motivation, contests the premise that beliefs are motivationally inert. The example given is that of a person who claims that a particular action would cause him pain and yet shows no motivation to abstain/withdraw from it. This would strike us as odd and would invite further explanation. Thus, it is argued that a genuine claim that an experience could be painful might carry "motivational implications" and yet express a belief, report a fact and be truth-apt as well (Sayre-McCord 2005). Other realists contend that the relationship between moral claims and motivation is complex and underline possibilities of weakness of will and other factors that would explain the absence of motivations in case of moral claims. Overall it can be said that moral realists while on occasions acknowledge the Moorean insight of moral beliefs being action-directed, continue to insist that moral beliefs can be treated epistemically at par with other non-moral beliefs. Realists would deny the existence of exclusive kind of scepticism addressed specifically to moral beliefs that does not extend to general scepticism towards beliefs. Thus, it appears that truth-first moral epistemologists have their ontological commitments laid out while tackling issues concerning moral beliefs and end up treating ME as handmaiden to moral ontology. These scholars, who are predominantly cognitivists and further realists too argue that epistemically speaking, moral beliefs are not altogether different from scientific or mathematical beliefs.

This strategy of realists, in my opinion, is closely tied to their response to the argument of asymmetrical scepticism (scepticism about moral beliefs alone and not about general beliefs as such). Moral realists tend to disagree with such sceptics as they argue for parity between moral and non-moral beliefs. Hence, in their response to asymmetrical scepticism, they again argue that science and other epistemologies (epistemology of mathematics, logic) are riddled with the same kind of inconsistencies that sceptics want to highlight in the moral domain. Realists then conclude that local scepticism about morality will lead to global scepticism and hence cannot be used as a critique of moral beliefs alone. If it is indeed the case that only moral beliefs are susceptible to such sceptical arguments, then it might be a ground for establishing moral epistemology. However, truth-first moral epistemologists resort

to establishing parity between moral and non-moral beliefs and end up becoming vulnerable to the same criticisms that the justification-first moral epistemologists faced.

This is the predicament that moral epistemologists find themselves in. In spite of their claims to consider ME as a subject matter by its own right, they have not been successful in establishing it. In fact, both the truth-first and justification-first groups of moral epistemologists through their practice undermine the discreteness of moral epistemology. It can be shown that justification-first moral epistemologists, going by their dispositions, would hardly find it worthwhile to consider ME as a separate discipline, since they might as well focus on concerns in epistemology generally and once issues regarding justification, scepticism and the like are addressed there, they might be simultaneously transplanted to the domain of moral beliefs. The truth-first moral epistemologists, on the other hand, give primacy to ontology, realism in most cases, and in their defence of moral realism, establish epistemic parity between moral and non-moral beliefs. Given that the epistemic status of moral and scientific facts is at par, it can be assumed that for realists, there is no distinction in the process of evaluation of moral and non-moral beliefs. This undermines the claim of moral epistemology to be a distinct topic of study. Apart from failing to establish moral epistemology as a sub-discipline, realists, see no need for a difference in the epistemic treatment of moral as opposed to non-moral beliefs. This move might open a Pandora's box since it risks collapsing the very distinction between moral and non-moral beliefs.

II

So far, I have argued that in practice, moral epistemologists seem to go about their business not requiring any specialised epistemology of moral beliefs. However, despite whether moral epistemologists seem to realise or not, we could conceptually enquire whether ME is unique enough to warrant a subject-specific discipline. In this direction, a few explicit conceptual attempts to justify the creation of a separate subject for ME, have been made by Copp (1991), Stewart (2007), and Jones (2008). I will begin with David Copp's account.

In his article, *Normativity and the very idea of Moral Epistemology*, Copp begins by asserting that the very existence of ME depends on certain assumptions; (1) moral statements express propositions and (2) we have cognitive attitudes towards moral statements. To justify ME as a separate subject that needs philosophical consideration, he feels the need for the additional assumption that (3) there are specific challenges in explaining justification of moral beliefs, different from the problems that arise in justification of non-moral beliefs. In the absence of this assumption, Copp claims that "moral epistemology would be no more deserving of special philosophical attention than, say, the epistemology of beliefs about automobiles" (Copp 1991: 189). Emphasising on the distinctions between moral and non-moral beliefs, he adds the assumptions—(4) moral claims express normative propositions that

need explanation and (5) it is the normativity of moral propositions that give rise to problems during justification of moral beliefs.[5]

Given that the normativity of moral beliefs is indispensable for Copp's argument (3), we can investigate whether normativity indeed poses a special challenge to moral propositions. I will argue that Copp's claim does not stand up to scrutiny, but let us persist with Copp's exposition of normative propositions. Copp distinguishes between two types of normative propositions: (a) Type-one normative propositions that appeal to existing standards in a particular society and (b) Type-two normative propositions that appeal to standards that are relevantly justified. Moral claims, Copp asserts, are the latter type of normative propositions. He contends that it is not a mere comparison that qualifies something to be normative but an implicit appeal to an authoritative standard.[6] Type-one normative propositions, according to Copp, are true only if the standards have a default validity from the collective (ex-etiquettes), whereas type-two ones are true only if the standards have an appropriate justification. Type-two normative propositions would have backing from those standards, whose standing is appropriately warranted. To put it differently, a necessary condition for type-two normative proposition to be true is that the concerned standards should be relevantly justified. Moral issues are necessarily type-two propositions. For instance, 'Rape would be wrong' is true, if there is a well-justified standard that prohibits it. It would continue to be wrong even if it did not have any social/collective backing.

Elaborating on the notion of standards and their relationship with propositions, Copp argues that the truth value of type-two normative propositions depends on the "relevant standard meeting criteria of justification" as specified by a higher-order standard (Copp 1991: 199). Copp argues that standards are not propositions and as an extension of the argument, contends that the criteria for justification are not epistemic.[7] He argues that norms or standards are not truth-apt, whereas propositions are necessarily truth-apt. Similarly, standards have the property of being in force or abandoned, whereas propositions cannot have that status. Having argued for the presence of an unbridgeable chasm between standards and propositions, Copp makes a case for a non-epistemic justification of standards. His argument proceeds in the following way: Epistemic justification can only happen for something if it is an "object of rational belief" (Copp 1991: 203). However, only propositions can be objects of belief. Therefore, standards cannot be epistemically justified. For Copp, however, this does not entail moral scepticism, since rational choice or practical

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[5] The core of this assumption seems to be the idea that we do not know what amounts to making a normative proposition true and hence justification of such normative propositions remains a problem.

[6] The notion of standard is further defined as (a) something specifying that certain conditions need to be met by members of a particular category and (b) something towards which compliance or non-compliance can be achieved. Norms, rules, commands, maxims can all qualify as standards.

[7] Copp refers to some of his earlier works (1995, 2007), where he argues that only propositions can be verified by empirical evidence and since standards cannot be verified by empirical evidence, it follows that standards cannot be propositions. He also asserts that standards and propositions seem to share mutually exclusive properties. The fact that commands can serve as standards also shows that there seems to be a fundamental gap between propositions and standards.

reason can supply non-epistemic justifications of moral standards. He calls such theories "practical theories' of justification[8] (Copp 1991: 203).

The implications of his theories of normativity and justification on the domain of ME can now be easily spelt out. If what he has argued so far is considered valid, it would follow that epistemology will fail to yield the required explanation of issues concerning moral knowledge. Thus, it is not the lacunae in our concepts of knowledge or inference that hinder our understanding of ME, but the lack of an adequate practical theory of justification of moral standards. Such a theory would help us understand the truth conditions of moral judgments. His argument can be summarised in the following way: If we have a theory of moral justification, we will have a theory of rational choice. With this, it would be possible to show how one standard (like rationality) can ground other standards and fulfil truth conditions of related moral judgment. Copp concludes by saying that the problem of moral knowledge is a problem of how to justify standards and this is not a problem of epistemology but of 'practical theory'. He concludes that "there are no principles of moral epistemology that are not simply corollaries of whatever general epistemology is most plausible". Copp claims that it is not his aim to undermine ME; however, if we take into account what we have just argued about the approach of justification-first moral epistemologists (considering ME as an extension of general epistemological tools to moral beliefs), there is hardly any other reading that is possible, especially when he claims that epistemology will fail to yield the required explanation of issues concerning moral knowledge. We can also take issue with Copp's conceptualisation of standards and his proclamation that the justification of moral standards is not epistemic but practical. Even if we are to grant Copp that standards have practical justification, the defence of some aspects of these practical theories must, in turn, involve epistemic justification. Commenting on Copp's paper, Bruce Russell echoes the same sentiment. According to him,

> [E]pistemic justification is at the root of it all even if we do not see it when looking only above ground. And the reason it is problematic in moral philosophy is the same reason that it is problematic in any branch of philosophy: it does not seem to involve empirical justification. The problem of moral epistemology is the problem of philosophical epistemology (Russell 1991: 214)

Copp, without much warrant, imposes the burden of demarcation on the attribute of normativity. All epistemic positions—foundationalism, coherentism work equally well with normative beliefs (Brink 1989; Sayre-McCord 1996). In line with coherentist or foundationalist expectations, normative beliefs can be consistent, have explanatory coherence or have defeasible justificatory status serving as foundations for other normative beliefs (Enoch 2009). There is no strong reason to support Copp's assumption underlying the emergence of ME since normativity fails to

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[8] Such theories can meet the justification condition and any such theory that meets the justification also satisfies the truth condition of corresponding moral claims. Copp holds that many such justification theories are possible, including the ones given by Brandt, Gauthier and Kant.

qualify as a distinguishing characteristic of moral propositions and no specific challenge seems to arise out of it. As Enoch puts it,

> [O]n no theory of epistemic justification I am aware of do normative beliefs constitute an interesting particular instance of beliefs, an especially problematic class of belief… it is hard to see any special difficulties applying it [any chosen theory of epistemic justification] to normative belief (Enoch 2009: 416)

This significantly undermines the philosophical importance that the field of ME claims for itself and as we saw earlier, even if we were to agree with Copp's argument that normativity is a distinctive feature of moral beliefs, Copp fails to show how the autonomy of ME is aided by his framework. Hence, whichever way one looks at it, Copp fails to provide any conceptual justification for ME to be a separate subject matter.

Todd Stewart, while enquiring into the purpose of such topical epistemologies, tries to understand when it is worth developing a topical epistemology.[9] A possible purpose he identifies is to clarify epistemic concepts as they apply to a specific domain. For example, ME might attempt a conceptual analysis of epistemic terms used in moral theory like justification, testimony, and knowledge. However, as Stewart argues, it is clear that when scholars use these terms in ME, they use it in the same sense as when they use it for non-moral beliefs. Further, when we indulge in topical epistemologies we are more likely to apply our "best analyses of epistemic concepts" to particular subjects and are interested in whether beliefs in these subjects are justified or not (Stewart 2007: 25). Thus, ME would be concerned with possible accounts of the modes through which justified beliefs about moral truths are obtained, and therefore it is possible to do ME with any pre-assumed epistemological approach.[10] In other words, ME can be pursued without any assumption of a particular conceptual analysis of justification being correct. This conclusion clearly undermines the autonomy of ME as a sub-discipline as it is reduced to mere application of existing epistemic theories and concepts. Stewart, however, proceeds to identify a criterion for establishing topical epistemologies in general, which can then be applied to ME too. Stewart introduces the term "process of belief formation" to refer to causal sources of belief like perception, memory, reasoning, testimony, wishful thinking and the like (Stewart 2007: 27). It is not necessary that all processes of belief formation are sources of justified belief. Those, that are, can be called as the justification-conferring process of belief formation (JCP).[11] With this background,

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[9] A topical epistemology is the epistemological assessment of beliefs about a specific subject matter (Stewart 2007: 23). Moral epistemology and epistemology of mathematics can be some examples of topical epistemologies.

[10] Whether this is the way ME *should* be practised is a different issue but this is certainly how ME *is* being practised by leading philosophers. Sinnott-Armstrong is concerned with addressing moral skepticism whereas Sayre McCord attempts a coherentist account of moral knowledge. Robert Audi pursues a moderate intuitionist approach to justification of moral beliefs too. Perhaps in sync with post-Gettier developments in general epistemology, justification has come to occupy a central position in ME too.

[11] He further qualifies JCP by saying it is "a source of beliefs that we think are *usually* justified in the sorts of circumstances in which we commonly find ourselves". Further justification conferred is to be treated as a prima facie justification.

Stewart contends that for establishing a topical epistemology, there must be a process of belief formation which is peculiar or special to the beliefs about the topic. Thus, the study of ME will only be warranted if there was a distinctive process of formation of moral beliefs. If it so happens that moral beliefs are formed in a way unlike other non-moral beliefs, then it is plausible that there exists one or more distinctive justification-conferring processes (DJCP) for such moral beliefs. This then could be the subject matter for ME and could act as a motivation for studying it. Stewart believes that moral emotions are such a DJCP with respect to moral beliefs. The role of moral emotions presents exclusive epistemological problems that a general epistemology might not be able to address. I wish to argue that Stewart's analysis applies only to a very small set of inferential practices and doesn't address the general formation of moral beliefs. Firstly, we must concede the existence of 'moral' emotions. It is not clear which emotions should be taken as moral.[12] Further, far too many assumptions have to be made to make Stewart's argument work. Those rational moral theories that rely on reason or rule-following would reject the importance given to emotions in justification of moral beliefs. Stewart himself has not elaborated on the specific case of ME in his article, and this limits our ability to engage with him. His proposal is heavily invested in the existence of moral emotions and the unique role they play in justification of moral appraisals. Both of these claims are contested. Further, the intensity and extent of moral emotions are societally variable and to project it as an objective justification-conferring mechanism would be premature. Therefore, till we are able to identify certain emotions as being necessarily present and causally active during moral appraisals, it would be hasty to accept his thesis that moral emotions can act as a unique justification for moral appraisals. As an extension, moral epistemology's claim to be treated as a topical epistemology also stands weakened.

Another attempt to demarcate ME can be seen from Karen Jones, who discusses what she calls as five "apparent disanalogies" between moral and non-moral enquiries (like scientific inquires), thereby making a case for what she calls as an "asymmetrical scepticism"[13] (Jones 2008: 84). The five disanalogies are:

1. Moral statements have an action-guidedness (condemning, recommending etc.) that non-moral statements seem to lack. This belies the surface-level assertoric form that is associated with beliefs. In other words, although moral statements (ex-Murder is wrong) *seem* to describe properties of the world, like other non-moral statements (ex-The sky is blue), clearly moral statements urge us to act on the proposition being asserted. Accepting a moral proposition appears to bring about a disposition to act in a particular way.[14]

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[12] While some emotions like empathy are obvious candidates for being called moral, others like disgust and resentment are more controversial.

[13] Asymmetrical scepticism is the possibility of being a sceptic with respect to moral claims but not about the larger epistemic endeavours. It is possibility of local scepticism as opposed to a global scepticism.

[14] Jones is joined here by Sayre-McCord too, who acknowledges in his articles (2005, 2013) that moral beliefs have distinguishing feature, namely their action-directedness, the prevalence of moral disagreement and the "normative authority" that commands allegiance. As he puts it, "moral claims are essen-

2. The disagreements over moral issues are much more widespread and deeply entrenched when compared to most non-moral beliefs. Even when people seem to agree on non-moral facts surrounding an issue, they may disagree over the moral issue arising out of it. In scientific discourses, disagreement occurs only as a result of a lack of evidence and convergence is expected over a period.

3. Moral facts can be rendered redundant whereas scientific entities evidently are indispensable. To explain scientific beliefs, scientific entities are postulated as an inference to the best explanation. No moral facts are deemed necessary to explain moral beliefs. Moral facts do not seem to serve any explanatory function and can be easily replaced by "explanations that refer exclusively to non-moral facts and facts about the observer's moral sensibility" (Jones 2008: 84).

4. The methodology for arriving at moral judgments seem to be less reliable than the methodology for arriving at scientific judgments. For instance, wide reflective equilibrium is a method used to arrive at moral judgments through a process of establishing coherence with a broader set of both moral and non-moral beliefs. However, coherence or consistency does not assure truth. Scientific discourse has no parallel for such an approach and is considered "inferior to the methods we use in paradigm forms of knowledge-seeking inquiry" (Jones 2008: 85).

5. Historical injustices committed in the name of ethics also seems to invoke scepticism over moral claims. Since claims of moral knowledge have always been used to perpetuate oppression and ensure dominance over the subjugated, scepticism over moral claims is prevalent.

Those who attempt to resolve these disanalogies try to establish a parity between scientific claims and moral claims and are sometimes called as "continuity theorists"; whereas those who argue for maintaining significant differences between moral and non-moral discourse are called as "discontinuity" theorists. Cornell realists (Boyd, Sturgeon, Sayre-McCord) would come under the continuity theorists and non-cognitivists (Gibbard, Blackburn) would count as "discontinuity theorists" (Jones 2008: 86). Either way, ME stands undermined, for the continuity theorists like justification-first moral epistemologists (for instance, Sayre-McCord, whom we discussed in "I" section) wouldn't need a subject-specific epistemology, whereas the discontinuity theorists often are not interested in epistemic responses to the question what justifies moral beliefs (for instance, Jonathan Dancy who argues that non-cognitivists cannot be considered to be doing ME), since they do not believe in moral

Footnote 14 (continued)

tially bound up in a way that non-moral claims are not" (Sayre-McCord 2005). He argues that having a moral belief is concomitant with having an appropriate disposition. To have a moral belief and not possess the suitable motivation is to be disingenuous. This attribute distinguishes moral beliefs from non-moral beliefs since in the case of non-moral beliefs, the fact that a person makes some claim sincerely seems never to entail anything in particular about her motivations. The argument proceeds like this: Non-moral statements report facts. Hence they are motivationally inert. Only, beliefs can be motivationally inert and be truth-apt. Therefore, non-moral statements are beliefs. Non-cognitivists harp on this distinction and argue that since moral statements are motivationally loaded, they must be expressions of desires, commitments, and attitudes. Therefore, they are not beliefs and hence cannot be evaluated as true/false.

facts and therefore it is argued that they have no need for discourse about moral knowledge either.

III

The only way out of this quandary, I submit, is to treat ME more as a methodological project that involves extending general epistemic tools to moral beliefs as a specific case, and not as a specialised topic-specific epistemology. To treat it as a methodology is to indicate a paradigm for analysing the matters of morality. Without fussing over the ontological presumptions, to do ME in this sense is to ask how people go about finding out whatever they believe can be known about moral issues. This is in stark contrast to efforts hitherto to locate moral epistemology as either a branch of metaethics or epistemology. Not only are such efforts futile, but they also fail to capture the essence of ME, which began with the "emerging interest in the problems of applied ethics" and how moral claims can be defended and it must remain true towards that (Arrington 1989: 6).[15]

Once we are willing to look at ME as a methodology, familiar evaluative practices like naturalism and intuitionism appear to fall into place as individual methods within this framework. Consider the question of moral justification which is a central concern for many moral epistemologists. The very fact that an investigation of this topic could proceed without worrying about whether the justification is one of the existence of moral facts or that of moral claims as an expression of attitudes reveals the methodological traits of ME. In a minimal sense, ME would undertake a methodological investigation of practical moral choices placed in front of individuals and how it is possible to provide objective justification. It seems to address those questions that concern both ethicists and epistemologists, yet neither of them would be able to respond meaningfully in isolation. ME addresses such queries that need an understanding and application of both epistemological and metaethical criteria and tools. ME assumes considerable social and political importance too when one considers such higher-order enquiries into the status, formation, and justification of moral beliefs. If certain people believe that abortion is immoral, how could one analyse whether their beliefs are justified and if one were to disagree, how would it be possible to show them that they were unjustified? In our public sphere with deeply contested social and political beliefs, ME offers a direction for us to arrive at grounds for interpersonal agreement. As Thomas Nagel points out, the question of ME becomes closely tied to political legitimacy too since, the issue is not just, "What are the grounds and methods of moral thought in general?" but "What methods can be used to justify conclusions that are fit to serve as the basis for public policy and public restraint?" (Nagel 1995: 210). ME deals with claims that are not only moral but are also deeply

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[15] ME has been comprehensively taken up by bioethicists, for example, in the last few decades, evident from Iltis (2016), Quirk (2004) and Nagel (1995).

social and political. If not with concrete and final solutions, it will help us with better questions, and for a sub-discipline, that is no less an achievement.

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