

Why Moral Epistemology is Not Just Epistemology Applied to Moral Beliefs



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Abstract

The current discourse on moral epistemology (ME), has hardly paid any attention to the question concerning the demarcation of the domain of ME within epistemology. Neither is the subject matter of ME considered unique, nor is the methodology adopted in its investigations considered distinct. We attempt to show in this paper that this omission does not restrict itself to a mere taxonomical oversight but rather leads to certain deeper conceptual concerns. We argue that a casual and porous understanding of the subject matter of ME is the result of conflating moral beliefs and justification with non-moral beliefs and justification. If ME doesn't merit a clear demarcation within epistemology, then the very legitimacy of ME is brought under a cloud, thereby threatening the distinction between ethics and epistemology. We believe G. E Moore foresaw this predicament and our interpretation of his work could offer a possible solution.

Keywords: *Moral epistemology, Moore's non-naturalism, Moral justification, Empirical moral epistemology, Non-empirical moral epistemology*

Introduction

This paper begins with a brief overview of the sub-discipline of ME, its subject matter and the enquiries it covers. In the first section, we aim to show that the demarcation of the domain of ME within epistemology has not been satisfactorily done. Neither in terms of its subject matter, nor in terms of its methodology ME is distinguished from non-moral epistemology.¹

Section II offers a way to carve the domain into two groups apropos, their epistemological commitments and shows that the two resulting groups namely, empirical and non-empirical moral epistemologists,

fail to justify the autonomy of ME. We attempt to show in this paper that this omission does not restrict itself to a mere taxonomical oversight but rather leads to certain deeper conceptual concerns. If ME doesn't merit a clear demarcation from non-moral epistemology, then the very legitimacy of ME is brought under a cloud². More significantly, a casual and porous understanding of the subject matter of ME is the result of conflating moral beliefs and justification with non-moral beliefs and justification. Such a conflation threatens the distinction between ethics and epistemology. We believe G. E Moore foresaw this predicament, and in section III our interpretative reading of his work tries to offer a possible solution. While Moore's criticism of empirical moral epistemologists is well-known, it is generally assumed that Moore would support non-empirical moral epistemology, and hence his criticisms would not apply to them. However, we contend that Moore has been read narrowly by most of the scholars and not merely naturalists but even intuitionists fail to allay the central concerns of Moore – namely maintaining the autonomy of moral beliefs and justification. It is in this light that we see Moore's non-naturalism and his *method of isolation*, enabling him to discern moral beliefs and justification from non-moral beliefs and justification, thereby maintaining a distinct ME. Our investigation, therefore, concludes that for moral epistemologists, the demarcation of ME within epistemology should be a cardinal concern, which would, in turn, provide a natural modality of demarcating ethics from epistemology.

Section I

Moral Epistemology (henceforth ME) is an emerging sub-discipline that lies at the intersection of moral philosophy and epistemology. Inquiries pertaining to the concept of knowledge have traditionally been regarded as epistemic inquiries, while inquiries pertaining to the evaluation of human actions, and their motives have been regarded as moral inquiries. Against this backdrop of epistemology and moral philosophy, the domain of ME encompasses investigations about the possibility of moral knowledge and justification of moral claims which falls at the intersection of both epistemic and moral inquiries. Scholars have often claimed that ME is as old as moral philosophy³. This hindsight inclusion apart, the sub-discipline of ME remained largely ignored within the literature on moral philosophy (and metaethics to be specific) under the influence of positivism. Moral philosophy was preoccupied with “uses of moral language” and “logic of moral concepts”, [2, p.3]. For instance, A. J. Ayer, C. L.

Stevenson, and R. M. Hare among others, viewed metaethics as involving predominantly semantic analysis of moral terms, and hence metaphysical and epistemological concerns of metaethics, for them, were “obscure” [6, p.16]. However, it was only with the decline of non-cognitivism around the 1970s, that a renewed interest in the problem of knowledge among western philosophers emerged [26, p.803]. This enabled the scope of investigations in metaethics to broaden to include issues under the umbrella of moral epistemology. As can be seen, although the issues now included under ME have been dealt with by philosophers for centuries, its nomenclature is considerably recent.

Thus, when today ME is spoken of as a subject matter in its own right [38] and is gathering increasing attention, it seems a legitimate question to ask whether it’s just old wine in a new bottle or whether ME provides genuine grounds for justifying its own distinct and independent domain of inquiry. It could be argued that to justify ME as a distinct domain of enquiry (requiring philosophical consideration), some specific challenges in explaining the justification of moral beliefs, when compared to non-moral beliefs must be identified. If, the epistemological treatment of non-moral beliefs in no way differs from that of moral beliefs, then as Copp argues,

[M]oral epistemology would be no more deserving of special philosophical attention than, say, the epistemology of beliefs about automobiles. [9, p.189].

Copp is essentially claiming that if ME is treated just as the application of epistemology to moral beliefs, one could argue there is no need for philosophers to designate it as a specific field of enquiry. We believe Copp makes a valid argument and that the burden of proof is on scholars inclined to treat it as a separate sub-discipline. However, the current scholarship on ME, falls short of discharging this burden by virtue of their conflation of moral beliefs with non-moral beliefs, and moral justification with non-moral justification.⁴ Establishing such equivalences is problematic because a belief in terms of its moral justification demands something other than an epistemic justification. For instance, if a close friend of mine, who has always supported me, is accused of committing a crime, I might be morally obligated to believe him when he pleads guilty. However, everyone else might hold him guilty, given the evidence presented to the court. I might be justified in vouching for his innocence, but that would be moral justification and not an epistemic justification⁵. It could also be argued that while epistemic justification aims at goals like true belief and propositional knowledge, moral justification can be

taken to refer to moral goals or moral standards [36, p.191]. While epistemic and moral justifications do often coincide, it is certainly possible that the two come apart in many situations⁶. It is this task of maintaining the distinction between moral beliefs and justifications from their epistemic counterparts that we are referring to as demarcating moral epistemology. Unless current scholarship on ME accounts for such a demarcation, in our opinion, they would invariably end up conflating ethics with epistemology, which we claim is a deeper conceptual error.

In the second section of this paper, we claim that the task of demarcating ME is yet to happen even after almost two decades since Copp cautioned us. Instead, contemporary scholars have taken ME to be a mere application of general epistemic concepts and principles⁷. To prove this accusation of the widespread *demarcational* disregard among scholars working in ME, we'll examine the writings of contemporary scholars working in ME and show that those philosophers who have provided definitions of ME, fail to demarcate it from non-moral epistemology and in those cases where they explicitly have not provided it, we attempt to show from their writings that they are not able to justify the creation of distinct subject matter of ME, thereby, unfortunately, conflating ethics with epistemology.

Section II

To aid this investigation, which seems to have a rather vast scope, we divide the current scholarship on ME on the basis of whether they undertake Empirical Moral Epistemology (EME) or a Non-empirical Moral Epistemology (NEME).⁸ By EME, we mean a commitment to obtain moral knowledge through experience, while by NEME, we mean a commitment to obtain moral knowledge through means other than experience. The purpose behind such a division is two-fold. Firstly, since an individual scholar's commitment to one of the camps (empirical or non-empirical) is fundamental to their theorization, we manage to capture an essential characteristic of their discourse. Consequently, any generalization based on this characteristic is likely to apply to all those with such commitments without much controversy. Secondly, such a categorization captures the current scholarship in either of the two categories without exceptions, i.e., currently one would not find any philosopher who would claim to have both empirical and non-empirical moral epistemology or neither⁹.

In the following two subsections, our primary purpose will be to

unfold and explain the failure of both EME and NEME in securing a distinct field of ME. Such a failure, as we shall elaborately discuss, is their inability to demarcate moral beliefs and justification from non-moral beliefs and justification. In the first subsection, we will establish that EME fails to do so on account of their treatment of moral facts as natural facts, while in the second subsection we will justify that NEME too fails to uphold the same distinction on account of their overarching conception of faculty of intuition which they employ both in service of justifying fundamental moral beliefs and certain fundamental non-moral beliefs.

Empirical Moral Epistemology

Under EME, scholars pursuing a naturalistic mode of inquiry can be further distinguished into Analytic Ethical Naturalism (AEN) and Synthetic Ethical Naturalism (SEN)¹⁰. Scholars such as Michael Smith and Frank Jackson can be considered to have commitments towards AEN, while scholars like Richard Boyd and Nicholas Sturgeon subscribe to SEN. The former group of scholars, unlike the latter ones, argue in favour of the semantic identity of moral terms with natural terms, thereby establishing an irrevocable reduction of moral properties to the natural ones. The assertion of semantic identity between moral terms and natural terms implies that for AEN, unlike for SEN, moral claims are formal. For SEN, despite reduction of moral properties to natural properties, moral claims are synthetic and a posteriori. We begin our exposition of EME by explicating synthetic naturalists' stance on ME.

Richard Boyd, one of the synthetic naturalists, argues for minimizing the “epistemological contrast” between science and ethics in his work *How to Be a Moral Realist* [5]. Boyd appeals for a ‘unification’ project in which scientific and moral knowledge are brought together “within the same analytical framework in much the same way as the positivists’ conception of “unified science” sought to provide an integrated treatment of knowledge within the various special sciences” [5, p.184]. For achieving this unification, Boyd aims to show that “moral beliefs and methods are much more like our current conception of scientific beliefs and methods”, thereby giving way for the indiscernibility of ME from scientific epistemology [5, p.184]. Boyd’s intentions leave us in no doubt that moral epistemology for him amounts to no unique enquiry as, according to him, it is a species of epistemology such that scientific epistemology might help us to discover moral facts. His fellow synthetic naturalists

are equally vocal about the indistinguishability of ME from non-moral epistemology. For instance, Sayre McCord asserts that the difference between the justification of moral and non-moral beliefs is often *a matter of degree* and although a few non-moral beliefs might be more justified than general moral beliefs, it is possible that moral and non-moral beliefs share the same level of epistemic justification with some of our non-moral beliefs. Therefore his defence is of

[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 [31, p.138].

The last sentence again stresses the parity that Sayre McCord is trying to establish between moral and non-moral beliefs at the cost of an exclusive moral epistemology. Nicholas Sturgeon, another Cornell realist, too plays down the disanalogies between scientific and moral enquiries. He is particularly against the partial skepticism that scholars bear towards moral facts while accepting the legitimacy of scientific facts. Morality, for Sturgeon, “is not on any shakier grounds than, say, Physics” [35, p.254]. Sturgeon’s entire strategy seems to be to show that the reasons provided for rejecting moral facts can be used to reject scientific facts too. However, since we routinely accept scientists’ claim about facts in biology or physics, we should, therefore, accept moral facts too [35, p.241]. Again it is obvious that no relevant epistemological difference between moral and scientific facts is acceptable to Sturgeon, and by extension, ME would have no discernible disanalogy with scientific epistemology.

Analytic naturalists, on the other hand, are distinct from Synthetic naturalists insofar as, besides their belief in the ontological identity of moral properties with natural properties, they all the more insist on the *semantic identity* of moral terms with natural terms, thereby ensuring the formal and a priori nature of moral claims. These scholars seek to justify their analytic naturalism by proposing a functionalist analytic naturalism [17] or reference-fixing analytic naturalism [21].

Frank Jackson’s Analytic naturalism is a functionalist account of analytic ethical naturalism. Accommodating both analyticity of moral claims with the property identity relation proposed by his functionalist account, Frank Jackson argues that

[W]hat is *a priori* according to moral functionalism is not that rightness is such and such a descriptive property, but

rather that A is right if and only if it has whatever property it is that *plays the rightness role* in mature folk morality, and it is an *a posteriori* matter what that property is.” [emphasis added] [17, p.151].

In other words, according to Jackson, the formal nature of the moral claim manifests in terms of the function or the role of rightness because it is this function that is known *a priori* through conceptual analysis. However, having known this through conceptual analysis, the property identity relation, according to him, is known through experience. That is to say that once the function is correctly *defined* through conceptual analysis, the task of *identifying* the exact property performing the concerned function or a role is a matter of empirical investigation, and thereby an *a posteriori* concern.¹¹

Another analytic naturalist, Michael Smith justifies his version of naturalism, attempting to accommodate the formal and a priori nature of moral claims with the claim of property identity by arguing that

[A]lthough it is an a posteriori matter [as to] which property plays a certain moral role, *the constraints* [emphasis ours] on the property that could play that role can be settled only a priori because they are to be determined either by stipulation in the *act of reference-fixing* [emphasis ours] itself, or by reflection on the meaning of the words. [21, p.29]

Smith argues that in his version of analytic ethical naturalism, the primary act of reference fixing is the result of the *a priori* conceptual analysis, whereas the latter act of identifying which natural properties fit in the already fixed references is a matter of empirical investigation, and thereby an a posteriori concern. As Nucetelli and Seay, put it –

If, as analytical naturalists contend, at least some moral predicates and sentences are conceptually equivalent to purely descriptive predicates and sentences, the possibility of replacing expressions in the moral vocabulary with purely descriptive expressions would be warranted a priori – although exactly which descriptive predicates and sentences might turn out to be the correct naturalistic replacements may well amount to an empirical matter of fact [23, p.13].

Thus, it could be said that analytic naturalists are not only semantically reducing moral terms to natural terms, thereby making foundational moral claims *a priori* and formal but are also reducing moral facts to

natural facts. Notwithstanding the feasibility of these proposals by analytic ethical naturalists, it is important to reiterate that, as far as ME is concerned, by making moral facts as a variety of natural facts, analytic naturalism invariably situates itself in the category of EME. Consequently, for analytic naturalists too, just like synthetic naturalists, the mode of obtaining moral knowledge, therefore, has to be the same mode of obtaining scientific knowledge.¹²

If synthetic naturalists, directly and overtly express their inability to discern the discourse on ME from scientific epistemology, then analytic naturalism, by virtue of its agreement with synthetic naturalism on the ontological identity of moral facts with natural facts, should at least indirectly and covertly, acknowledge their inability to construe a distinct ME from scientific epistemology. Given this conceptual obligation, it is not surprising that none of the contemporary analytical naturalists devotes any time towards explicating ME as a distinct domain of enquiry, let alone spending time distinguishing ME from scientific epistemology. Thus, it should be clear that for the empirical moral epistemologists, ME does not present any exclusive challenge. Analytic naturalists subsume moral epistemology into existing domains of natural and social sciences, while synthetic naturalists are non-reductionists but nonetheless as Campbell points out, their strategy is to argue that “unless the non-moral cases can be shown to be disanalogous to the moral ones” moral naturalists feel they have no reason to worry [7]. However, this as we have been arguing, strikes at the very root of the plausibility of distinct ME.

Non-empirical Moral Epistemology

Although a wide range of views come under the umbrella of NEME, there is an underlying commonality amongst them of rejecting ethical naturalism. For all scholars committed to NEME, experience does not play an evidential role in acquiring moral knowledge (or non-derivative moral knowledge at least). Thus scholars with varied commitments in normative ethics like Sidgwick and Kant can still be incorporated into the umbrella of NEME because they would assert that moral knowledge has non-natural roots and its apprehension can occur

only through a faculty of moral intuition or reason that is independent of sense experience. Moral reality, so conceived, is posited as *sui generis*, reducible to neither the natural nor the supernatural and requiring a mode of apprehension

comparable to mathematical intuition. [7]

To capture the entire spectrum of such views, we would like to divide such scholars pursuing a non-naturalistic mode of inquiry, into intuitionists and particularists. Scholars like Robert Audi and David Enoch are considered to be intuitionists, while Jonathan Dancy and David McNaughton can be taken as examples for particularists. Let us consider the approach of intuitionists to ME.

Audi believes the task of ME to be largely (though not entirely) clarificatory. He claims that ME should account for the “epistemic status of moral principles construed as defeasible” [1, p.3]. Audi responds to a major challenge for intuitionists that comes from Mackie’s ‘queerness’ argument. Mackie argues that if there are moral facts and properties, then they will be unlike any other natural facts, we have come to know. Further, we would need “some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else” [27, p.38]). Audi explicitly invokes the axioms of arithmetic to argue for parity between mathematics and moral truths.

The truths of arithmetic are surely not queer, yet they have not been shown to be grounded either in the world in the way Mackie’s view requires or in formal logic. The same holds for such propositions as that nothing is both round and square. Like arithmetic propositions, these seem to have neither the blessing of testability by scientific procedures nor the lofty protection of derivability from pure logic. [1]

Elizabeth Tropman, another intuitionist claims that

The intuitionist idea is supposed to be that nothing stranger than reason and reflection, of the kind that operates in mathematics, is needed to see moral truths in a non-inferential and non-empirical fashion [37, p.42]

The parallel that intuitionists try to establish between mathematics and ethics is not just limited to the ontological status of facts in these domains but also seems to extend to other areas such as moral development too¹³. Here’s Campbell explains the analogy

We begin to learn mathematics in a similar way, using concrete examples and relying on authority. Then, as we develop understanding, we are eventually able to grasp relevant truths, such as that $2 + 2 = 4$, in a way that is not dependent

on the vagaries of experience. If we put two oranges in a hat and then add two more and subsequently find five there, we assume an extra one was there to begin with or that it is a trick hat or that the oranges can mysteriously reproduce themselves. We don't doubt that $2 + 2 = 4$. Similarly, it may be argued, once we grasp the wrongness of treating another person merely as a means, finding many examples of this treatment or many people who think the treatment is right won't in the least alter, or even seem relevant to, our perception of its wrongness. [7, Sec3.2]

This is typical because such philosophers believe that the challenges faced by epistemologists in the moral domain find parallels in the non-moral domains also. Hence, non-empirical moral epistemologists effectively surrender the distinctness of moral epistemology by treating moral beliefs and justification at par with mathematical beliefs and justification. Such a move in terms of its structure is no different from that of empirical epistemologists, who treated moral beliefs and justification at par with empirical beliefs and justification¹⁴. For instance, although Noah Lemos indicates the requirement of dealing with the questions concerning the knowability and justifiability of moral beliefs this process, nevertheless, for her is not unique but rather “viewed as a particular instance of that broader issue familiar to epistemology in general” [18, p.507]. David Enoch¹⁵ echoes a similar statement when he claims that who has , claims that

First, on no theory of epistemic justification I am aware of do normative beliefs constitute an interesting particular instance of beliefs, an especially problematic class of beliefs ...whatever your theory of epistemic justification, it is hard to see any special difficulties applying it to normative beliefs [11, p.4]

Enoch explicitly adds that he agrees with Sayre McCord's view (mentioned earlier) that there seems to be no “distinctive epistemology of moral beliefs”. Thus, it becomes evident that intuitionists cannot make allowance for a domain-specific moral epistemology as they do not see any need for a distinct methodology when they are approaching ME.

Moral Particularists like Dancy differ from other intuitionists in claiming that the moral rightness or wrongness of an action can be directly intuited, once the action's particular attributes have been understood. They disagree that there are any general moral principles that

can be applied to individual cases specifically. In spite of this difference, the commitments of particularists and other intuitionists (often called generalists), do not differ much on the issue of moral knowledge, which is treated by both of them to be at parity with other types of commonly held knowledge claims.

Particularists and generalists often treat moral knowledge as being on a par with other types of commonly accepted knowledge. Just as we can know that our internet connection is running slow, that the milk is on the verge of going stale, or that our friend is annoyed by the story just told at his expense, so too we can know that it would be wrong to refuse directions to the person who is lost, that our co-worker was courageous to criticize her supervisor, and that the American justice system treats many people unfairly. [30]

For instance, Dancy holds that ME can only emerge after we assume (i) that there are moral facts about which actions are right and wrong and (ii) that moral agents have beliefs about such moral facts. With these assumptions in place, ordinary epistemological questions regarding knowing a moral fact, structure of moral justification, and moral skepticism become enquiries pertaining to ME [10, p.532]. We can infer from Dancy's approach a willingness of particularists too, to see ME as an application of epistemology to moral beliefs.

Thus, the incapability of both EME and NEME in securing a distinct ME can be attributed to their inability to demarcate moral beliefs and moral justification as being qualitatively distinct from non-moral beliefs and non-moral justification, respectively. To clarify, our claim is not that scholars committed to NEME can't have a moral epistemology or that their enquiries cannot be called as enquiries in ME. Our argument is that their stand on ME has not been clearly articulated. If the self-evidentiality of moral claims is what makes ME different, then by their own admission, it is present in the epistemology of mathematics, or as some have argued in general cases of perception also. Thus our effort is not a negation but an appeal for clarification regarding what separates ME from non-moral epistemology. EME fails to adequately defend their demarcation of moral beliefs from non-moral beliefs because moral facts, to which moral beliefs correspond to in their formulation, are treated as a variety of natural facts. NEME too fails to defend the same distinction owing to their overarching conception of faculty of intuition which they employ both in the service of justifying fundamental moral beliefs and fundamental non-moral beliefs. Thus, it can be concluded that the

failure to demarcate moral domain from non-moral domain, and thereby the absence of distinct ME is either an implication of homogenization of moral facts with natural facts or of homogenization of mode of justification of moral beliefs with that of non-moral beliefs. In the coming section, we argue that G. E. Moore, a leading meta-ethicist of the twentieth century not merely had foreseen this predicament but, he also attempted to resolve it, thereby eventually making a distinct space for ME within his meta-ethical framework.

Section III

G. E. Moore and the Plausibility of Moral Epistemology

We argue in this section that Moore's adoption of intuitionism not only preempts the hurdles of empirical moral epistemology but more importantly it also preempts the challenges faced by non-empirical moral epistemology. We claim that Moore's demarcation of ME is made possible by the distinct nature of his non-naturalism which, as we shall explain, is as much different from other forms of non-naturalisms and intuitionisms espoused by non-empirical moral epistemologists as it is different from naturalism espoused by empirical moral epistemologists.

Moore's ontological stance of non-naturalism emanates from his rejection of ethical naturalism. His primary discomfort with ethical naturalism is their commission of 'Naturalistic fallacy'. 'Naturalistic fallacy' is the fallacy that results from any attempted definition of good because, according to Moore, any such definition erroneously identifies good with the property other than itself, and in doing so often identifies good with a natural property or a natural state of affairs. Such an identification, for Moore, is problematic for it propels the treatment of good as being qualitatively similar by virtue of its co-existence with natural properties in an intrinsically good state of affairs. Moore writes,

[Though] it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good... But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good [and] that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'Naturalistic fallacy' [22, p.62]

Moore substantiates his claim of Naturalistic fallacy with the open-question argument. According to the open-question argument, good cannot be defined and thereby identified with anything else other than itself because, as Moore writes, "... whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good" [22, p.67]. In other words, Moore argues that in case of any definition of good like that of 'good is pleasure', one can very well raise the intelligible and significant question in the form of 'is pleasure really good?'. And, moreover, the very possibility of such a question, according to him, indicates that given definition of good such as 'good is pleasure' is not *the correct* definition, for the intelligibility or significant nature of the question implies that the purported definition is not an analytic definition, and hence not a definition at all. Clarifying his point further, Moore writes that by asking the question 'is pleasure really good', "one could easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant" but, rather one is really asking an 'open' question, and not a closed question [22, p.68]. That is to say, Moore believed that had any definition of good in this particular form been correct, then we would not have been able to raise such a question *significantly*. Consequently, Moore concludes that good is indefinable, and thereby unanalyzable in nature. This way of pointing out the commission of Naturalistic fallacy, on the part of all naturalistic theories of ethics further enables Moore to argue that it is precisely on account of such implausibility of defining and thereby identifying good with any natural phenomenon that good has to be understood as being non-natural in nature.

Moore's open-question argument, thus, seeks to establish Moore's ontological position of non-naturalism.¹⁶ Further, such an ontological stance of non-naturalism, allows Moore to argue for a kind of moral realism, which is evident in his attempt to establish the intrinsicity of good to a natural state of affairs despite the qualitative distinct nature of good from all other intrinsic natural properties that constitute the respective natural state of affairs [22, p.12, 286, 298]. To put it differently, the ontological stance of non-naturalism established by Moore is logically extended by him to argue for his case of moral realism.¹⁷

However, in our opinion, it is noteworthy here that the position of non-naturalism adopted by Moore is not solely motivated by his metaphysical urge of embracing moral realism. We claim so because had it been only about his metaphysical commitment to moral realism, then Moore could have easily adopted ethical naturalism, which anyway would

have allowed him to establish moral realism. This in turn inspires us to conjecture that besides his metaphysical concern of securing moral realism, Moore through his ontological stance of non-naturalism is also committed to furnish a moral epistemology that ensues from his ontological stance of non-naturalism. To put it differently, Moore's insistence on non-naturalism as a means to secure moral realism speaks of his concern for having a moral epistemology.

In our reading of Moore he probably foresaw that any naturalist paradigm inbuilt within empirical moral epistemology would treat both moral facts and non-moral facts as natural, and thereby would lead to the conflation of moral beliefs with non-moral beliefs and moral justification with non-moral justification. That is to say, we argue that perhaps Moore through his criticism of ethical naturalism indicated the incapability of empirical moral epistemologists in demarcating ME, which results in the loss of autonomy of ethics, eventually leading to the erasure of the distinction of ethics from epistemology.

Further, as mentioned earlier, besides posing a challenge to empirical moral epistemology for its inability to demarcate ME, and thereby failing to discern ethics from epistemology in our reading of Moore, his non-naturalistic moral realism also poses a similar challenge to non-empirical moral epistemology. In other words, we argue that Moore's non-naturalism appended by his intuitionism is distinct from the intuitionism of non-empirical moral epistemologists in so far as Moore's version of non-naturalism opens up the possibility of demarcating ME, and thereby distinguishes ethics from epistemology.

Unlike the framework of empirical moral epistemologists, the framework of non-empirical moral epistemologists does not conflate moral beliefs with non-moral beliefs and moral justification with non-moral justification by naturalizing moral facts but they end up doing so by not being able to provide a distinct justificatory source for fundamental moral beliefs. Thus, we argue that the problem of demarcating ME and of thereby separating ethics from epistemology is faced by both empirical moral epistemology and non-empirical moral epistemology despite the latter's affinity to non-naturalism and intuitionism like that of Moore.

Moore, in our opinion, is distinct from other intuitionists of non-empirical moral epistemologists because Moore offers a distinct source of justification for moral beliefs. Such a source of justification, therefore, for him, not merely separates moral beliefs from non-moral empirical beliefs but it also separates moral beliefs from non-moral, non-empirical beliefs like that of beliefs of mathematics.

Given that Moore does not locate the source of justification of foundational moral beliefs in the faculty of intuition in order to prevent the conflation of possible ME with another kind of epistemology, he devises a different mechanism that would *directly* justify foundational moral beliefs, thereby opening up the possibility of distinct ME. Moore terms such a mechanism as a *method of isolation*. Moore holds that unlike in the case of non-moral empirical beliefs or non-moral non-empirical beliefs, one can *ascertain* the truth of moral beliefs through the *method of isolation*. Moore describes the justificatory apparatus of the method of isolation as an *analytic* act, in contrast to a cognitive one, wherein, “it is absolutely essential to consider each distinguishable quality [each of the parts constituting the whole], *in isolation*, in order to decide what value it possesses” [22, p.145]. To put it differently, according to Moore, one can justifiably ascertain a state of affairs as being a good one by analytically assessing the value of the given state of affairs through an abstract act of isolating it from other states of affairs that it might be related to (its context), and then accessing the value, if any, of the parts that constitute it. If this isolating act of severing it from its surrounding context does not dislodge it of its value then, Moore contends that the cognition of the non-natural property of good within the given state of affairs stands verified and therefore, the belief expressing it, stands justified. Such a mode of justification is different from both the empirical moral epistemologist mode justification wherein moral beliefs would be justified through observation and experience, and non-empirical moral epistemologist mode of justification wherein foundational moral beliefs would be justified through the faculty of intuition. Thus, we assert that neither empirical moral epistemologists, nor non-empirical moral epistemologists have devised a distinct justificatory apparatus for moral beliefs, which in turn has not allowed them to demarcate a distinct ME, and thereby separate ethics from epistemology. However, Moore, on account of his *method of isolation* as distinct justificatory apparatus justifying moral beliefs intended to demarcate ME and thereby separate ethics from epistemology.

Conclusion

Our effort in this paper has not been to show that there is illegitimacy in the practice of ME. The field continues to be enriched by the works of eminent scholars. However, we have argued that there is glaring negligence in attending to the problem of what is ME and how it stands vis-a-vis

a non-moral epistemology. We have tried to highlight the repercussions of not addressing it. For those who might think that such a demarcation is impossible, we have tried to show a possible response by Moore. To Moore's credit, he can be seen to have attempted a way that avoids the predicament that philosophers committed to both EME and NEME find themselves in today. It is not our claim that Moore should be embraced by all moral epistemologists, but that a more engaged reading of Moore, with the context of demarcating ME in mind, can help contemporary moral epistemologists articulate their own responses, reinforcing the foundations of a promising field of enquiry.

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Notes

- 1 We do not intend to imply that non-moral epistemology is homogenous. It might include different kinds of epistemologies such as mathematical epistemology, scientific epistemology and so on. The issue of homogeneity of non-moral epistemology is a moot point for the purposes of this paper because our primary concern is the distinction of ME from non-moral epistemology, and not feasibility of internal divisions in non-moral epistemology.
- 2 A similar concern has been highlighted by [27] but both the aim and methodology of this paper differs from his.
- 3 Plato's *Meno*, *Republic* [12]; Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* [19]; Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* [15]; Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* [2] are a few such examples that scholars have in mind when they trace the prevalence of ME in the history of philosophy.
- 4 Further, it could just as well be remarked that in the absence of any specific challenges that arise in ME vis-a-vis a non-moral epistemology, we would be better advised to spare our efforts and simply transplant general fallouts and conclusions from epistemological enquiries into the metaethical domain.
- 5 This example has been adapted from Bonjour [4, p.6].
- 6 Also see Sinnott-Armstrong [33, p.209-11] and Hermann [25, p.80-5] for elaboration on this point.
- 7 For instance, Zimmerman, Jones and Timmons propose that "as epistemology is the study of knowledge, so moral epistemology is the study of moral knowledge"

- [39, p.4]. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong too considers ME as “simply epistemology applied to substantive moral claims and beliefs” [32, p.5].
- 8 We are building on a distinction from Audi who talks of rationalist and empiricist moral epistemologists as two major rival camps in moral epistemology. Similar to the one in general epistemology, the rationalists regard “basic moral truths-those not epistemically derivable from other moral truths-as knowable (or at least justifiedly believable) a priori” While the Empiricists in moral epistemology regard the “basic moral truths as knowable (or justifiedly believable) only empirically: roughly, through experience that provides relevant evidence” [1, p.4]. However, we realize that such a distinction is not without its drawbacks. Audi himself acknowledges that “The controversy between rationalist and empiricist epistemologies is very much alive today, and I see no hope of escaping it-or readily resolving it in moral epistemology” [1, p.5]. What emboldens us to stick with this distinction is the fact that we only see this as a way to carve the landscape of moral epistemology. The distinction is purely instrumental for us. Whether a particular philosopher is to be categorized as an empirical or non-empirical moral epistemologist, as we would show later, is of no consequence to our project.
 - 9 There are philosophers who deny the possibility of moral knowledge altogether, perhaps because of skepticism regarding the existence of moral facts. There are two ways to reconcile our distinction in such cases. Firstly, one could deny that such philosophers are doing ME [3, p.82]. Secondly, when philosophers do not explicitly commit to the existence of moral knowledge, their moral epistemology can still be classified as being empirical or non-empirical based on whether they rely on intuition or on experience for justifying moral beliefs. We have chosen the second option.
 - 10 The terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ in this context fundamentally refer to different kinds of property identities that both these camps of naturalists uphold. Further, Synthetic Ethical Naturalists are also known as Cornell realists primarily on account of three major figures of this group namely, Richard Boyd, David Brink and Nicholas Sturgeon being associated with Cornell university.
 - 11 It has to be noted that, according to Jackson, though understanding the rightness role is a matter of *a priori* conceptual analysis, unlike Moore, he does not hold this conceptual analysis as an obvious analysis. That is to say that in Jackson’s conceptual analysis which he calls conceptual entailment, the closeness of the possible question on the analysis may not be very obvious; but it, nevertheless, will prevail.
 - 12 We must add that most analytic naturalists add a qualification to this statement, for instance, for Peter Railton, it is an ideal observer who would decide it.
 - 13 Also see [19, p.108-109] and Clark Doane [8] who argue that though there are dissimilarities between mathematics and moral domain, the argument is made stronger by it and not weaker.
 - 14 For instance, Huemer’s ethical intuitionism (called phenomenological conservatism) has been said to be a natural outgrowth of his general epistemological position [34]. Similarly, it might be said that for Brink, Rawls’ reflective equilibrium is an application of coherentism to the justification of ethics [6, p.103].
 - 15 Enoch is well known for characterizing and arguing for a robust realism that posits the existence of irreducible, response-independent, non-naturalist normative truths.

- 16 On this particular point, Moore has been criticized by some scholars for failing to distinguish semantic indefinability of the term ‘good’ from the ontological irreducibility of the property of good. Any such criticism, we argue, however, overlooks Moore’s clarification on the same matter both in *Principia Ethica* [22, p.60] and his revised intended preface to the same [22, p.67] wherein he clearly emphasises that the point being made by him is an ontological claim about the property of good, and not about the term ‘good’.
- 17 It is important to notice here that the denial of ethical naturalism understood as non-naturalism in itself does not necessarily lead to moral realism. For instance, error theories in meta-ethics despite their denial of ethical naturalism and their cognitivist stance do not uphold any form of moral realism. Hence, it needs to be reiterated that Moore’s denial of ethical naturalism, manifested as non-naturalism was with the view of establishing moral realism.

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