

**The Hesitant Empiricist:  
Why Moral Epistemology Needs Real History**

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(Forthcoming in *Analysis*)

Sarah McGrath's *Moral Knowledge* is a powerful and important book; no-one who really cares about the prospects for a realistic and informative moral epistemology should avoid it. In this critical notice, I won't attempt anything like a proper summary of the book. Rather, I will only indicate what I take to be its major strengths and weaknesses, and will try to give a sense of where it has directed my own thinking, as someone who has been tearing his hair out over moral epistemology for a while now.

While not defending the strong claim that moral knowledge *is* ordinary empirical knowledge, McGrath's central idea is that we gain and lose each kind of knowledge in the same ways:

moral knowledge can be acquired in any of the ways in which we acquire ordinary empirical knowledge, and our efforts to acquire and preserve such knowledge are subject to frustration in all of the same ways that our efforts to acquire and preserve ordinary empirical knowledge are. (2)

This, of course, entails that those who have wanted to draw strong contrasts between ordinary empirical knowledge and ethics are mistaken. That said, McGrath's main opponent throughout the book is the *rationalist*, who both claims that "the distinctively moral content of our views is not justified by empirical evidence", and that only some process of a priori reflection ultimately does the justifying. Moreover, she devotes a chapter to attacking perhaps the most prominent advocate for this position, namely, the *reflective equilibrium* theorist, who holds (roughly) that justified belief is the result of a fairly intellectual process whereby we seek to establish coherence between our particular moral judgments and more general principles. By contrast, McGrath aims to show both that these rationalist models are inadequate and that empirical evidence can directly confirm or disconfirm moral views. While not aiming to show that *all* moral knowledge has this empiricist flavor, she nonetheless carves out a middle position where at least some of our knowledge in this domain might have its source in experience and observation.

Stepping back, it is useful, I think, to note that McGrath is not concerned to rebut skepticism here. She is engaging in what Aaron Zimmerman calls *constructive* rather than *defensive* moral epistemology (Zimmerman, Jones, and Timmons 2018, 4-5). The constructive epistemologist assumes that at least some of our moral beliefs are true and justified and looks to explain how they count as knowledge, whereas the defensive epistemologist engages in the much more demanding project of establishing that we know anything at all. Readers who worry that moral skepticism is mostly not discussed in *Moral Knowledge* should, I think, remember that an epistemologist is surely permitted to adopt this overall approach, even if some find it unsatisfying.

Stepping back even further, it is also clear that McGrath inhabits the more general tradition of *naturalized epistemology* (Kim 1988). This naturalist comes in many flavors, but McGrath clearly holds to two central tenets. The first is just the commitment to the constructive approach. The second is the conviction that substantive empirical investigation, broadly construed, is relevant to the question of whether agents have knowledge in some domain. Thus, the naturalized *moral* epistemologist proceeds by taking a bit of true moral belief that people rather obviously seem to actually have, traces out the methods or processes which are mainly responsible for the belief in question, and concludes that those methods are generally reliable or justification-conferring.

It is an old objection to this method that it cannot be genuinely normative, and this objection has some cautionary force. Arguably, we are not doing epistemology until we have some filters which can sort beliefs into more and less justified (Jones 2005). Thus, McGrath's naturalist, constructive model cannot be too dogmatic; it must provide us with some resources which might aid us in determining when our apparent moral knowledge is or is not *really* knowledge. As we will see, it is not entirely clear whether McGrath accomplishes this aim.

In any case, *qua* constructive, naturalist epistemologist, McGrath has a powerful argument against rationalism in epistemology. The argument has a very simple, domain-neutral structure:

- (1) Rationalist theory T says that a fairly demanding amount of reflection is required for an agent to possess knowledge in domain D,
- (2) Most of the knowledge we do in fact possess in domain D is not the result of that sort of reflection. Therefore:
- (3) Theory T is false.

The second premise is naturalized epistemology at work, since it consists in a purely empirical claim about the best explanation for our beliefs, combined with the constructive assumption that human agents actually possess particular knowledge in domain D. Of course, the plausibility of the argument depends entirely on how likely we are to accept that the knowledge referenced in (2) really *is* knowledge. However, in my view, the moral rationalist is in serious trouble here. Unless they are a particularly enthusiastic bullet-biter, they are unlikely to deny that, for example, most adults know full well that slavery is wrong or that taking care of one's children is generally morally required.

But most adults *never* engage in the kind of reflection described by the rationalist, let alone with respect to such beliefs. "I ought to take care of my kids" is just not the sort of belief that anyone, even the rationalist, comes to after rarefied rational reflection. McGrath deploys this master argument against the reflective equilibrium theorist, and I am inclined to see this argument as both crucially important and decisive.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there is a very large question that the argument leaves us with. McGrath concedes that this sort of reasoning *can* generate new moral knowledge, but that this is only when it proceeds on a foundation of knowledge that has already been acquired. All of this means that the constructive naturalist needs to know where this initial foundation comes from. If most ordinary parents know that they should take care of their kids, and that they'd be subject to justified blame if they failed to do so, what explains how they know this?

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We've already seen McGrath's schematic answer to this question: we often acquire our moral knowledge in the same way that we acquire our ordinary empirical knowledge. So, her first big positive claim is this: we can secure moral knowledge purely on the basis of social influence alone. Just as I can know that it's 2:15pm on the basis of your say-so, I can come to know that various things are right or wrong on the basis of social influence:

one way of gaining full-fledged moral knowledge is through the manifestation of our natural tendency to adopt beliefs that are held by those around us and that are presupposed by common practices. In favorable

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<sup>1</sup> Though it should be noted that McGrath allows that the equilibrium model might explain the acquisition of a more demanding state: moral *understanding*.

circumstances, the child counts as knowing in virtue of having acquired the views from reliable sources; her ability to justify moral views acquired in this way (either to herself or to others) by giving an account of why they are true, might come only later, if at all. (60)

Notice that this isn't just a claim about *testimony*, it's a claim about *mimesis*. My natural human tendency to simply *absorb* the beliefs of those around me is often all I need to acquire moral knowledge. This is an important point that all the participants in the moral testimony debate should take seriously: the mimetic case is surely the most common one, and the case where some agent explicitly says "that's morally wrong" to some other credulous agent is in fact not particularly common.

In any case, any naturalistic moral epistemologist is, I think, forced to agree that this can happen. The reality is that there is simply too much morality that we sponge up from our social context, no matter who we are. Even the hard-nosed rationalists among us mysteriously tend to arrive at moral beliefs which are mostly what you would expect given their social and cultural context.<sup>2</sup> Notice, too, that *mimesis* and social learning are excellent candidates for the best explanation of how agents come to beliefs like "I really ought to take care of my kids".

Yet, I want to step back for a second and ask about a potentially fishy use of the term "favorable circumstances". These are the circumstances which, according to McGrath, are necessary for the mimetic mechanism to transmit moral knowledge. Of course, this is a truism, we should not normally expect anyone to gain knowledge in *unfavorable* circumstances. But what are these circumstances? According to McGrath, in order to acquire knowledge in this way, one must inhabit a "morally enlightened environment" (104), where the beliefs of one's community are, by and large, true. And thus, as she recognizes, we have just pushed the question back another step: how does a community arrive at this body of belief? How do we sort communities into the morally benighted and the morally enlightened? Since the answer cannot consist in just saying that morally enlightened communities got their views from prior morally enlightened communities, another answer is needed. Notice that this is *not* the demand that McGrath return to defensive epistemology. We are not asking that she build moral knowledge up from scratch. We are just wondering how these agents became relatively morally enlightened, which is not

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that some rationalists, like Peter Singer, hold one or two views that some consider abhorrent is not much evidence against this; Of all the humanly possible moral views one might hold, Singer is a *utilitarian*, and utilitarianism holds enormous cultural influence in the modern West.

the same question as “tell me how an evil demon isn’t deceiving you about all of your moral beliefs”.

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Thus, we get the crucial fourth chapter, wherein McGrath argues that experience and observation in general can be a source of moral knowledge. This would complete the explanatory picture: most of our moral knowledge comes from others via fairly unmediated transmission or ‘sponging’, and this is true for most of our ancestors, but at crucial points in the process individuals had belief-forming *experiences* which produced wholly new justified true moral belief. These moral reformers, in turn, formed the foundation of communal improvement, and the result of this long, winding chain is the group of contemporary human beings who know such things as *slavery is wrong*. But of course, since this story alone is consistent with the rationalist’s claim that these moral reformers made their advances via acts of careful reflection, we need to know that observation and experience were in fact responsible for at least some of these advances.

The claim about observation and experience is this: “there are possible circumstances in which a moral belief is *confirmed* by a non-moral observation.” (123). Our moral reformers, then, might have had new moral beliefs confirmed by observation. McGrath focuses on confirmation rather than entailment for obvious reasons; tackling the problem of entailment would require confronting Hume’s famous is-ought gap, and this is a huge task. Certainly, the fact that claims of type A never entail claims of type B does not show that A-statements never *confirm* B-statements. And confirmation is a holistic matter, depending on an agent’s set of beliefs and on the probabilities they assign to various possibilities. Thus:

The possibility of confirming a moral belief by a non-moral observation would amount to this: the believer rationally assigns a higher prior probability to the moral claim conditional on a certain non-moral observation than she does to the moral claim unconditionally, and then she makes the relevant observation. (121)

Now, McGrath argues that the chapter on moral testimony already establishes her broadly empiricist claim about experience:

If there are circumstances in which testimony can make it reasonable to be at least marginally more confident that some moral belief is true, then there are possible circumstances in which a moral belief is confirmed by a non-moral observation, because the former is just a special case of the latter. (123)

But again, this is *not* a story about where moral knowledge comes from in any ultimate sense, it is just a repetition of the fact that when we are in enlightened communities we uncritically absorb knowledge from our peers. We still lack an explanation for how any community becomes enlightened. This is why McGrath goes on to ask:

Are moral beliefs ever confirmed by non-moral observations, where the non-moral observations are not evidence about the moral opinions of others? (124)

And the answer must be: yes. If it is not, the naturalized anti-rationalist project must fail, for there is nowhere in the historical process for moral knowledge to be generated *a posteriori*, and a regress would threaten, one that could only be halted by *a priori* knowledge. In addition, the rationalist would surely claim victory, noting that every actual improvement in a moral community must be directly traceable to *a priori* reflection.

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So what are McGrath's cases of *a posteriori* moral learning that are not simply testimonial or mimetic?

**Scenario 1:** Ted believes that same-sex marriage is *intrinsically* immoral. Yet, he also believes that immoral acts tend to produce bad consequences (by his lights). His society institutes same-sex marriage, and he observes that no bad consequences obtain as a result. His belief that same-sex marriage is immoral is thus disconfirmed by the observation. (123)

**Scenario 2:** "Initially, Ted believes that  $\phi$ -ing is seriously morally wrong. He also believes that Fred, with whom he has worked closely on a professional basis for years, is an ordinary, decent

person who would not habitually engage in behavior that is seriously morally wrong. He then discovers that Fred habitually  $\phi$ -s.” (124)

In each case, McGrath argues, it can be rational for Ted to modify his moral view on the basis of empirical information, and it is in this sense that the moral view is said to be *disconfirmed* by that information, such that the contrary moral view is confirmed. The problem here is that neither of these cases is obviously one in which justified belief has been acquired.

To begin with **Scenario 1**, note that cases clearly exist where a person is lead away from the moral truth via exactly the sort of process. Many people throughout history have taken a rather dim view of human nature and have correspondingly believed that following morality involves accepting suffering, repression and heartbreak. I have in mind here ascetic or self-flagellating religious practitioners, as well as the philosophers, like Kant, who have seen the natural human tendency to self-love as the fundamental source of moral evil. Such people have thus believed that when morality is followed, people suffer, because their natural desires and drives must be ruthlessly monitored and suppressed. Such people will thus ‘confirm’ their belief that homosexuality is a sin by noting that people with same-sex attraction are suffering through repression, guilt and social punishment as a result of homosexuality’s general prohibition. Thus can one and the same process, empirical confirmation, can easily lead them away from the truth.

In a footnote, McGrath insists that she is not a subjective Bayesian, and that she thinks that some auxiliary beliefs (or distributions of priors) are irrational (121, fn25). So, she might simply declare that the belief “following morality involves suffering, repression and heartbreak” is irrational, and conclude that no confirmation has occurred when a person observes this sort of suffering in the world. Of course, Kant would make the symmetrical claim against her: anyone who thinks that morality and happiness go together is simply deluded. But the problem here runs deeper than the resolution of this first-order question; to simply *say* that no confirmation is occurring here is to once again claim that moral knowledge-acquisition is only possible when an agent has a great deal of substantive moral knowledge. This is just the explanatory regress all over again: we will be saying that people can ‘learn’ that homosexuality is permissible only when they’ve rejected most or all of the Bayesian priors that could lead them to confirm the contrary moral belief. This is starting to look like a very enlightened and very modern person indeed. But it is the emergence of just this sort of person that we are trying to

explain, and the rationalist has an explanation. So far, the empiricist does not. I will eventually suggest that McGrath has the resources to defeat this Kantian and to defend the claim about objectively irrational priors, but the text itself does not explore these resources.

Moreover, faced with such opportunities for learning, actual human beings routinely deploy a steadfast response whereby the false moral belief is strengthened. In the actual world, Teds in the first scenario routinely adjust or refine their prior views of what counts as a 'bad' consequence in order to *confirm* their belief that homosexuality is immoral. This is because of a background belief, something like "bad consequences *must* result from immoral behavior," which drives them to refine their conception of what counts as a "bad consequence". For example, Ted might come to think that the widespread adoption of children by married gay couples is a bad consequence even if he didn't previously. Whether or not some *possible* Ted disconfirms his moral belief as McGrath describes, it is clear that, as an empirical matter, people are just as likely (or even more likely) to confirm their moral beliefs in this way. The more general truth, long emphasized by people in many moral-psychological traditions, is: people rationalize strongly held moral beliefs post-hoc, confirming them by adjusting other beliefs and priors in their subjective belief-set (Nietzsche 1886/1990, Haidt and Bjorklund 2008). Thus, confirmation on its own cannot explain how a community becomes more enlightened, since it is just as likely to lead us away from the truth.

But if one and the same process is just as likely to produce error as it is to produce truth, then it is not a process that generates *justified* belief. The process does not meet what McGrath herself calls the *minimal reliability condition*: in order to acquire knowledge, an agent must use or be under the influence of a process that is "sufficiently reliable", which I take to be at least better than chance. McGrath is keen to hold the Reflective Equilibrium theorist's feet to this particular fire: she says that the description of reasoning given by that theorist is consistent both with good and with bad reasoning, and that this description therefore "under-characterizes" knowledge-acquisition (46). The problem is that the same can be said of empirical confirmation, which is very cheap indeed.

The same points can be made with respect to **Scenario 2**. I cannot quite see how this same sort of 'learning' couldn't have someone 'learn' that fascist violence is permissible after seeing a close and trusted friend join the Gestapo. Moreover, McGrath recognizes that whether or not Ted's experience in that scenario leads him to disconfirm his belief about same-sex relationships depends entirely on the



relative strength of the two moral beliefs in question. If his moral trust in his friend is powerful enough, it will weaken his moral conviction that same-sex relationships are wrong. But if his opposition to same-sex marriage is strong enough, the new experience will simply cause him to hate his friend. All of this is just the old Quinean point all over again: confirmation is holistic and therefore deeply sensitive to the subjective belief-set of the agent in question. (Quine 1951)

And again, we must ask ourselves, what is the norm, here? What have human homophobes *normally* done when they have discovered that a close friend or compatriot is gay? Enmeshed comfortably in societies with majority acceptance of same-sex marriage, we may forget that we are extremely unusual in this regard, and that the phenomenon McGrath cites, whereby people have softened their views on homosexuality after friends and family have ‘come out’, is extremely recent, perhaps only beginning in the 1980s. The human norm is exactly the opposite: the Teds of our species have routinely decided that even close friends and family are wicked, immoral, deserving of severe punishment. But such people were not wicked or immoral. Again, if a process is just as likely to sustain error as produce truth, the it cannot explain the acquisition of justified belief, and therefore it cannot explain the acquisition of knowledge. ‘Confirmation’ of this sort is far too unconstrained.

The easy way to fix this is to just stipulate that Ted’s belief that his friend is morally upstanding is much stronger than his belief that homosexuality is immoral, and that he is therefore disposed to eliminate the false belief from his psychology. But this of course renders the account pointless; we are trying to explain *what* makes Ted reliable in this case, and to stipulate that he is disposed to eliminate false beliefs from his psychology is to just say that he is reliable. Again, the rationalist-friendly regress looms.

McGrath’s final effort in Chapter 4 comes when she insists that experience can ‘condition’ us into becoming more reliable in the moral domain. This, it turns out, is entirely conditional on whether we inhabit a social context that is sufficiently enlightened (138). Here, again, the project threatens to come apart at the seams, with the rationalist waiting in the wings to declare ultimate victory. The problem for these moderate empiricist proposals is that each case of ‘learning’ has as a condition that either the agent or the people around them possess firmly held true moral beliefs, otherwise the empirical processes in question will lead to error. But this means that the empirical processes *themselves* are not reliable and cannot explain how agents require knowledge.

However, let me lay my cards on the table: McGrath's project is not sunk. The moderate empiricist can go on to provide determinate cases of processes or procedures where moral learning seems more likely to have occurred than not, and they can do so without having to stipulate that any agent has true beliefs. However, in order to do this, they badly need to descend from the lofty heights of abstract philosophy into messy social-psychological reality. They need, in other words, a *vindicatory genealogy of morals*.

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Consider again the case of same-sex relationships. In some social-historical contexts, friends and family 'coming out' softens opposition to homosexuality, and in others, it simply provides an occasion for the angry reinforcement of the belief and the subsequent punishment of friends and family. Plainly, there is some relevant difference in these contexts that explains the differential responses. Moreover, McGrath and I, as supporters of same-sex relationships, *must* think that this difference is *normative*, that is, that the difference is more likely to lead people to truth than to error. What is that difference, and can it be specified without merely resorting to the empty claim that ours are societies where people tend to have true beliefs?

Well, here's a start: what about *severe poverty*? Is it just a coincidence that softening attitudes occur in societies where almost everyone lives free of severe poverty, both today and historically? I doubt it. Poverty has vast, cascading effects on human psychology. In almost every non-moral domain of knowledge-acquisition, the severely impoverished are (regrettably) less able to pursue knowledge, and this is not just because they don't have the time or energy for reflective equilibrium (virtually no-one has the time or energy for *that*). Rather, it is due to the way that poverty dominates one's responses to one's physical and social world, forcing one's mind to interpret every new piece of information in light of its relevance for securing food and/or shelter. This, can, for example, produce an extraordinary emphasis on social conformity and obedience to tradition, simply in virtue of the fact that collective survival requires that every person know their role and stick to it. Surely these are not ideal conditions for moral inquiry, and it is no accident that the ascetic-Kantian belief discussed earlier flourishes in these conditions.

Or, what about the fact that *disgust* responses dominate homophobic social contexts? While I am somewhat divided on this one, I can certainly see the argument. As McGrath's colleague Tom Kelly has argued, we have good

independent reason to be suspicious of a scenario wherein an emotive response which evolved to detect bugs and poisons is suddenly “detecting” moral evil (Kelly 2011). We may, in addition, have good independent reason to think that other emotions are far more reliable, at least in certain contexts: are we really to think that compassion and disgust are epistemologically equivalent responses to a social world? Yet, in McGrath’s systematic treatise in moral epistemology the emotions are simply not discussed, and this must count as a lacuna. An empiricist cannot reasonably ignore the effects of the emotions on moral belief-formation, as virtually any psychologist of morality will list the emotions as primary (or even overwhelming and dominant) causes of moral belief.

Or, finally, what about the fact that many modern societies are profoundly *interconnected* in a way that many past societies are not, such that each person is likely to meet and interact with many, many more of their fellow citizens than are people in more traditional societies (Henrich 2020)? Is this fact really epistemologically neutral? Again, I doubt it. Morality is definitionally about our conduct with others, so the idea that an ideally morally reliable person would remain comparatively socially isolated seems simply untenable. Wide experience with many types of people seems like an eminently reliable way to gain moral knowledge. In addition, there is no other form of objective knowledge where being socially isolated increases one’s chances of success; the image of the lone scribbling scholar is pure fantasy, and the most successful sciences are those where many tens of thousands of researchers are constantly adjusting their beliefs in response to the inquiry of other group members.

So perhaps Ted is morally reliable not *just* because he confirms his moral belief empirically, but because he does so in favorable circumstances. He is not afflicted by severe poverty or distress, able to suppress the emotion of disgust, and inhabiting a social context where he has a wide array of experiences and connections to diverse others. So he, and many others like him, gain moral knowledge. And here is the crucial point: none of these explanations require us to assume that anyone has any true moral beliefs whatsoever.

All of this, and more, in your next exciting page-turner, (Smyth 2020). But, shameless self-promotion aside, I think this is where the anti-rationalist has to go. They must try to offer concrete social-historical explanations, such as those above, which show that mimetic, testimonial or ‘confirmational’ experiences are more likely to result in true belief because they occur in favorable circumstances, where ‘favorable circumstances’ does not just mean ‘circumstances in which they or the people around them already have a lot of knowledge’. And they must show that they

and the people like them *inhabit* those circumstances. They cannot rest easy with mere possibilities, which McGrath often does.

In sum: McGrath's fundamental anti-rationalist position is completely correct, but she does not, in my view, quite see where anti-rationalism must take us. Once we have abandoned the historically dominant and at times even hegemonic commitment to rationalism in moral epistemology, moderate empiricists must try to dig into social-historical reality in order to uncover reliable social and psychological processes (Anderson 2016). We cannot rest easy with mere possibilities.

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Now, many traditional epistemologists will balk at this complaint; surely *philosophers* are allowed to avoid the messiness of the real world, if anyone is. They are allowed to theorize about possibilities, to chart logical space, and so forth. So I want to close by arguing that absent this sort of real, concrete, empirical story, McGrath's book risks counting as evidence against its own central contention. Consider, if you will, a book called *Ordinary Empirical Knowledge*, penned by an eminent scholar-scientist at one of our leading research institutions. Without trying to get into the details, we might ask, what would such a book look like?

Well, as I've stressed, it should not escape our notice that the positive claims in McGrath's book are by and large *possibility-claims* about moral knowledge-formation. These are: (1) Moral knowledge can be gained from others, (2) moral knowledge can be gained via observation and experience, but (3) moral knowledge can be lost via observation and experience. These claims are almost entirely backed up with hypothetical examples, and they don't really explain how any actual person came to know anything.

Now imagine that the best that an eminent philosophically minded scientist could do after fifteen years of world-beating research is to argue for a series of similar possibility-claims about ordinary empirical knowledge. That is, suppose they could only bring themselves to say that such knowledge *can* be acquired via experimentation and such knowledge can be a result of social influence. It would be extremely surprising if this is *all* they could say. In the case of ordinary empirical knowledge, everyone accepts that knowledge acquisition is *possible* on the basis of observation and experience, and many already accept that it can be transmitted via

testimony. The book *Ordinary Empirical Knowledge* would likely contain far stronger claims than this; it would provide detailed case-studies, showing how particular people gained important bits of knowledge, showing how they proceeded in reliable or trustworthy ways and how this led to their adding definitively to the stock of human knowledge. Just to take one example of complex, culturally-laden knowledge, developmental psychology and cultural anthropology could be deployed in order to show how, for example, the children of the !Kung tribe learn how to keenly perceive certain detailed facts about their natural environment, a capacity that people in industrialized societies lack. Or, more mundane cases could be exquisitely described, such as that of a person correctly perceiving an object because they are in favorable lighting conditions, because their visual system is transmitting signals back to their brain, and because they are not on any hallucinogenic drugs or under the influence of any seriously distorting emotion.

No such illustration appears in McGrath's book: we have no psychologically detailed, socially and historically embedded description of persons making moral discoveries. Rather, we just learn that such discoveries *can* happen and that they might happen via observation, experience or social learning. This is not the overworn criticism that philosophers "don't engage with the real world". Rather, the problem is that the stark contrast between the postulated *Ordinary Empirical Knowledge* and McGrath's *Moral Knowledge* cries out for explanation. If two domains acquire knowledge in virtually the same ways, this contrast should not exist, *ceteris paribus*.

Moreover, I should stress that the hypothetical book *Ordinary Empirical Knowledge* would often provide the reader with positive epistemic direction: it would enable us, for example, to improve our own empirical beliefs or to put ourselves in a position where our own beliefs could be more reliably acquired. If we are starting to worry about our perceptual beliefs, such a book could easily tell us to (a) improve the lighting conditions we often find ourselves in, and (b) have our vision checked to see if we need glasses, to (c) remain calm and (d) refrain from taking hallucinogenic drugs. This, again, is because it could contain a detailed description of the circumstances and capacities which enable ordinary knowers to gain perceptual knowledge.

So, why is one of the most brilliant and accomplished moral epistemologists working in philosophy today only able to defend possibility-claims about knowledge, while her imagined counterpart can produce vast swaths of rich, psychologically realistic and socially embedded description? When moral

epistemology is at least as old as all other forms of epistemology? Well, this is exactly what you would expect to be true if the two forms of knowledge are *not* acquired in the same ways. The book thus threatens to count as an odd kind of performative contradiction.

Yet, as I have insisted, hope is not lost: the empiricist-friendly moral epistemologist can push forward. Just as the epistemologist about ordinary empirical knowledge can talk to us about reliable lighting conditions, the moral epistemologist can talk about the social and historical conditions that make moral belief-acquisition more reliable, for example, having enough to eat or being socially connected to a great many diverse others. Just as we might be instructed to get glasses or laser surgery, we might also be instructed to engage in therapeutic exercise to reign in the influence of disgust on our moral thinking.

And so, McGrath's wonderful and stimulating book leaves me with this final conviction: *since* her anti-rationalist arguments are correct, we empiricists must be able to provide this sort of substantive, constructive moral epistemology. If we can't, then this will establish pretty decisively that ordinary empirical knowledge and moral knowledge are very different indeed.

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