

Sarah McGrath. *Moral Knowledge*. Oxford University Press 2020. 240 pp. \$72.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198805410)

Sarah McGrath begins her book by advancing an ambitious working hypothesis: moral knowledge can be acquired in the same ways we acquire empirical knowledge, and impeded in the same ways. This proposal is the through-line of *Moral Knowledge*, tying together the discussions of disparate topics in moral epistemology, such as reflective equilibrium, testimony, and empirical observation. McGrath comes bearing both good and bad news for moral philosophers. The bad news is that the traditional method of pursuing moral knowledge is not up to the task. Reflective equilibrium is too demanding and too weak a method to explain our moral knowledge. The good news is that contrary to what philosophers typically think, we can gain moral knowledge through empirical observation.

The brief introductory chapter is followed by a critique of reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is often thought to be the method people use when pursuing moral knowledge. In brief, it involves forming ‘considered judgments’ about the truth of various moral propositions, and then arriving at general moral principles by seeking coherence between one’s judgments (13). McGrath argues that reflective equilibrium under-describes the method used in moral philosophy. While reflective equilibrium is a correct *partial* explanation of what moral philosophers are doing, following this particular method is neither necessary nor sufficient for attaining moral knowledge. McGrath supports this claim with two objections: the method is both too demanding, and too weak.

Reflective equilibrium is said to be too demanding to explain the moral knowledge normal people possess. If there is any moral knowledge to be had, McGrath believes we must credit some to regular people (21). When our parents teach us that harming other people is wrong, it seems that they are imparting moral knowledge. Yet, few of our parents are engaged in reflective equilibrium. Thus, reflective equilibrium cannot be necessary for the acquisition of moral knowledge, because plenty of people possess moral knowledge despite having never engaged in the necessary practice.

I think the proponent of reflective equilibrium can answer this objection. A regular person might not engage in reflective equilibrium as characterized by philosophers, but they do something similar. When a person watches a crime drama, they can form moral judgments and seek coherence between their judgments and beliefs. We could imagine plenty of similar situations. This imperfect version of reflective equilibrium is analogous to the imperfect empirical procedures people follow. A meteorologist has better instruments and the experience necessary to develop reliable forecasts, but when I gauge the weather by looking at the sky, I am using a less sophisticated version of the same empirical method. Just as my less sophisticated empirical method is sufficient for knowledge, the layperson’s less sophisticated version of reflective equilibrium might be enough to acquire the kind of basic moral knowledge we credit people with. A defender of reflective equilibrium might be able to escape the demandingness objection, but the weakness objection is not so easily avoided.

The real difference between the methods used to arrive at moral and non-moral knowledge is the epistemic status of the starting point. Both the meteorologist and I have observations, which have a positive epistemic status that permits them to provide foundational justifications for beliefs. The ‘considered judgments’ we start with in moral theorizing are instead what we judge to be true under

ideal conditions, so that they are confident, undistracted, and stable (31). McGrath notes that a judgment could meet all the formal criteria for being a ‘considered judgment’ despite seeming absurd. Consider the claim: ‘We are morally required to occasionally kill randomly’ (31). Regardless of how we describe the optimal conditions that must be met for forming a ‘considered judgment,’ someone could meet them while forming a judgment that seems absurd. McGrath adds that it would be silly to expect someone to reason from judgments that are absurd—from our perspective—to reliable moral knowledge. Thus, ‘considered judgments’ are too infirm a foundation for moral theorizing. Instead, we need a starting point with a positive epistemic status.

The third chapter discusses the possibility of moral deference. Can one reasonably defer to the moral judgement of someone else? Related to this is the question of whether anyone has moral expertise such that other people have a reason to prefer their judgment to their own. For McGrath, both of these questions can be answered affirmatively. Moral knowledge is the same as knowledge in other domains, in that we can defer to reliable sources and that there are reliable sources to turn to. McGrath defends her position well, though she notes some features distinct to moral deference.

Testimony is often ‘opaque’ evidence in favour of a belief; it can provide evidence without explaining why its propositional contents are the case. That moral testimony is ‘opaque’ makes it a suboptimal justification for moral beliefs in two ways (95). First, someone whose moral beliefs are based on testimony cannot give interpersonal reasons for thinking something is right or wrong. That is, they cannot explain to a third party why they should think an action is good or bad. Second, someone cannot do the right thing for the right reasons if their moral belief is based solely on testimony, since they do not have a full understanding of what the right reasons for acting are.

While McGrath’s discussion of moral deference is compelling, there is an exception to her claim that someone whose moral beliefs are based on testimony cannot offer interpersonal reasons for belief. Suppose there are two gravediggers, Denis and Jean. When Denis suggests they steal a deceased person’s jewelry Jean retorts that: ‘Father Labelle said stealing from the dead is wrong.’ Though Jean’s testimonial evidence is opaque, she can offer Denis an interpersonal reason for not stealing. If we assume that Father Labelle is a moral expert, that Denis and Jean accept his moral expertise, and that Denis knows Jean to be trustworthy, Jean has given Denis a reason to think theft is wrong. Thus, moral testimony can provide interpersonal reasons for moral belief under certain conditions.

Given that moral testimony is one way to gain moral knowledge from an empirical source, McGrath says we should be unsurprised to find other empirical sources of moral knowledge (123). She identifies four ways in which empirical observation can facilitate moral knowledge: enabling, triggering, conditioning, or (dis)confirming. I focus here on McGrath’s account of (dis)confirming moral belief through observation as it is her most controversial claim, and I take it to be what most people have in mind when they ask whether empirical observation can provide us with moral knowledge. McGrath’s paradigmatic example of moral (dis)confirmation is *Surprising Discovery**: Ted thinks that same-sex relationships are wrong, but discovers that his co-worker Fred, who he believes is a good person, is in a same-sex relationship (129). For McGrath, it is reasonable for Ted to treat the empirical discovery that Fred engages in this activity as grounds to think the activity is

not wrong. I agree that Ted's surprising discovery is a reason for him to revise his beliefs about same-sex relationships, but this is explicable in terms of moral deference rather than moral observation. A person's moral testimony can be communicated through their actions just as well as their words. Fred is a morally upstanding person, so it makes sense to defer to his moral judgment on the issue of same-sex relationships. That Fred is in a same-sex relationship is a good indicator that he thinks they are morally acceptable. And if a good person like Fred thinks it's okay, then Ted should agree. McGrath's paradigmatic example of moral observation is therefore collapsible to moral testimony.

McGrath claims it would be surprising if testimony were the only empirical way to confirm or disconfirm moral beliefs (124). I disagree. Testimony is distinctive for *transmitting* knowledge, and any kind of knowledge can be transmitted by testimony, even if it is unknowable empirically. Take a basic logical truth like the law of non-contradiction. There is no way to know it empirically, but I can tell someone it is true. Testimony is the only kind of empirical knowledge you could have of logical truths, and this is not surprising when we remember that testimony can transmit anything. Thus, it wouldn't be surprising if moral testimony is the only empirical source of moral knowledge.

The last section of the book asks whether moral knowledge can be forgotten. For McGrath, the idea that someone could forget their previous moral knowledge seems puzzling because its loss puts that person in a poor position to see what they have lost. That is, if someone's moral judgment degrades, they will struggle to see the change in themselves (168). McGrath also rejects Ronald Dworkin's claim that the lack of an explanatory connection between moral beliefs and the truth is not a reason to doubt our moral beliefs (186). While non-moral arguments cannot offer rebutting defeaters for moral beliefs, they can offer undercutting defeaters. Dworkin was thus wrong to think that non-moral arguments can never provide us with defeaters for our moral beliefs.

Moral Knowledge is appropriately titled given its wide-ranging treatment of issues in moral epistemology, and is valuable for its clear, forceful interventions in the debates McGrath discusses. Even the most masochistic philosopher must admit that reading philosophy can sometimes become a slog, with argumentatively interesting books getting bogged down in dry and impenetrable prose. In defiance of that tendency, McGrath has written us a book that is accessible in its clarity without sacrificing rigour. Anyone interested in how we acquire moral knowledge should read her book.

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