Sarah McGrath

Moral Knowledge
Oxford University Press, 2019, x, 218 pages.

Luciana Ceri

1.   Moral knowledge: a concise title for a book which is all too rich in topics. Sarah McGrath deals with them on the basis of the «working hypothesis» that she states in the opening chapter, according to which moral knowledge can be acquired and lost in any of the ways in which we acquire and lose ordinary empirical knowledge.

The hypothesis consists of two parts: (1) any source of empirical knowledge is also a potential source of moral knowledge; (2) our efforts to acquire and preserve moral knowledge are subject to frustration in all of the same ways that our efforts to acquire and preserve ordinary empirical knowledge are. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are devoted to defending the first part of the working hypothesis, whereas the second part is defended in Chapter 5; the concluding chapter contains a summary of the theses argued for by McGrath – an unusual yet helpful choice to the reader, in consideration of the not small number of the issues dealt with (and not always examined in depth).

2.   In the first place McGrath discusses the method of reflective equilibrium, and highlights its weaknesses: this method is not sufficient for attaining moral knowledge, because coherence among one's moral views is not enough to make them justified. Moreover, this method can produce new moral knowledge only on the basis of prior knowledge.

McGrath's objections concern an «ambitious interpretation» of the method of reflective equilibrium, according to which the fundamental justification of moral views depends on the application of this method, and such a method is the only, or at least the primary, source of moral knowledge. This interpretation is inconsistent with McGrath's working hypothesis that the sources of moral knowledge are various. According to a different, «modest» interpretation accepted by McGrath, the capacity of moral reasoning aimed at achieving reflective equilibrium to produce moral knowledge depends on the reasoner's already having moral knowledge that is not itself the product of such reason-

ing. Therefore, the method of reflective equilibrium is not the ultimate source of moral knowledge, but rather an account of how we should pursue moral understanding, which is often a more demanding intellectual achievement than moral knowledge and does not necessarily come with it. Placing this method at the core of moral epistemology, McGrath points out, risks overintellectualizing our cognitive relationship to morality.

3.   Where does moral knowledge come from, if not from the application of the method of reflective equilibrium? McGrath defends the claim that it comes from sense experience and empirical observation, and distinguishes four ways in which both contribute to moral knowledge: they contribute to it by enabling us to acquire moral concepts, by prompting us to take up beliefs that we would not have hold in the absence of our experiences and observations, by providing confirming or disconfirming evidence for moral claims, and by refining our capacity for moral judgment to the point that subsequent exercises of that judgment are sufficiently reliable for its deliverances to count as knowledge.

However, moral knowledge comes from others as well: our access to it has a social dimension that the method of reflective equilibrium completely overlooks. Mcgrath asserts the relevance of social environment by defending the «Moral Inheritance View», according to which everyone's earliest moral views are "inherited" from the adults around her: a child «knows so long as the people from whom she picked up the beliefs know, and they are reliable sources of information whom she has no reason to distrust» (61).

The relevance of social environment to the development of one's moral views is hard to be questioned; however, the claim that one can acquire moral knowledge by "inheriting" from others their moral beliefs seems to be questionable: which are the criteria to assess the reliability of a source? More importantly, are there any reliable sources in the moral domain? Are there any full-blooded moral experts?

4.   McGrath does not answer these questions, although she deals at length with the issue of moral expertise. On the one hand, McGrath argues (against Bernard Williams) that even if it's true that ethics is not the sort of thing about which there could be a theoretical science, that would not be enough to preclude any possibility of the existence of full-blooded moral experts. On the other hand, McGrath holds that there is no necessary relationship between either realism and the thesis of the existence of moral experts or antirealism and the thesis of the nonexistence of moral experts. According to McGrath, the

view one holds about the existence of moral experts depends on one's view about egalitarianism, which is the (normative) thesis according to which «when it comes to the truths of morality, no *normal adult human being* is in a privileged position compared to any other normal adult human being» (83).

While providing convincing arguments for the claim that the solution of the issues concerning moral expertise does not ultimately depend on the choice of metaethical framework, McGrath gives a very vague definition of egalitarianism: which are the criteria to assess who are the adult human beings that can be considered "normal"? And what are the moral truths that no normal adult human being is in a privileged position to know?

5.   McGrath does not openly criticize egalitarianism, whereas she explicitly defends moral «deference»; this term refers to cases in which one holds a moral view only because another person holds it. McGrath regards deference as a source of moral knowledge, while according to others it is problematic. Why is the idea that one defers to someone else's views about certain moral problems debatable?

As McGrath points out, a satisfying answer to this question should identify some feature of morality that distinguishes it from those domains where deference seems unproblematic. One of the two proposals taken into consideration by McGrath appeals to the interpersonal aspects of moral judgment: in some contexts one has to justify one's own judgments; yet moral deference to another person's judgment does not enable one to understand the reasons that justify it. According to the other proposal, moral deference is incompatible with an (Aristotelian) ideal associated with moral agency, that is, the ideal of doing the right thing for the reasons that make it right. In order to satisfy this ideal, one has to understand those reasons; moral deference, however, only enables one to know what is the right thing to do.

Although McGrath sets out the two proposals with clarity, she neglects moral understanding, which is relevant in each of them and has already been mentioned in the discussion of the method of reflective equilibrium. This matter is not of secondary importance, since the understanding of the reasons that justify a moral judgment is connected with the agent's autonomy: can someone who adopts a moral view without understanding the reasons that justify it be autonomous?

6.   Deference is inconsistent with autonomy, which plays a central role in a view that is very different from the «Moral Inheritance View» defended by McGrath: the «Critical Reflection Picture». On this view, the capacity to un-

derstand the reasons why a moral belief is true, or the capacity to justify it, is the necessary condition for such a belief to be a kind of knowledge. McGrath rejects this view by suggesting that it presupposes the view that if one is justified in believing something, then it follows that one is able to justify one's belief. This criticism is based on a unified – and, so, «economical» – account of knowledge, on which the standards that we must meet in order to have moral knowledge are not different from the standards for non-moral knowledge: in the absence of some compelling reason for thinking that things are otherwise, we should assume that such standards do not vary from domain to domain. Now, according to Mcgrath, two standards must be met in non-moral domains: (a) if one knows something, then one is justified in believing what one knows, and (b) being justified in believing something does not entail having the capacity to justify one's belief. Therefore, (a) and (b) must be met in the moral domain as well. Thus, the «Moral Inheritance View» is true and the « Critical Reflection Picture» is false.

7.   McGrath holds that the assumption about the invariance of the standards for knowledge does not beg the question in favor of the working hypothesis that moral knowledge can be acquired and lost in any of the ways in which we acquire and lose ordinary empirical knowledge, since this hypothesis does not concern the standards for moral knowledge, but rather its sources. Now, what makes the «economical» account of knowledge better than the account on which the standards for knowledge are not the same from domain to domain? McGrath does not say anything about that.

Furthermore, at the beginning of her book McGrath states that it is «an exploration of moral knowledge: its possibility, its sources, and its characteristic vulnerabilities» (1). Sources have already been mentioned. As to the vulnerabilities of moral knowledge, McGrath holds that such knowledge can be lost in two ways: either by acquiring evidence in the light of which one is no longer justified in believing what one previously believed or by forgetting what one once knew.

It is worth noting that the exploration of the ways in which moral knowledge can be lost presupposes a thesis on which the whole book rests, that is, the thesis according to which moral knowledge exists. Despite a wide examination of the sources of this kind of knowledge and its vulnerabilities, the question about the possibility of moral knowledge is not even touched upon; one has not to deal with it, however, if one assumes the existence of moral knowledge right from the beginning. It is exactly in such assumption that the main weakness of this book lies. McGrath envisages this objection: «an inquiry into the ways in which we acquire moral knowledge might seem to presuppose answers to difficult

metaethical questions that should be considered open» (4). Indeed, presumably, the existence of moral knowledge entails the existence of moral facts to be known, and the existence of moral facts is still contentious. Although McGrath anticipates such objection, it remains unanswered: McGrath just expresses her skepticism about the methodological priority of moral metaphysics and moral semantics to moral epistemology, which is suggested by that objection.

Why moral epistemology should be given priority? This question too remains unanswered; yet McGrath mentions the epistemological part of John Mackie's argument from queerness against the thesis according to which there are objective moral values in order to bolster the view that giving priority to moral epistemology can help to solve ontological questions as well. This mention seems curious in consideration of Mackie's contribution to shifting the focus on moral ontology in the metaethical debate.

Luciana Ceri
Università di Firenze
lucianaceri@libero.it