

# Moral Knowledge and Experience<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I explore some of the ways in which experience can contribute to moral knowledge, or what commonly passes for moral knowledge. As a way of focusing the investigation, I will explore how one might attempt to reconcile two widely held ideas about morality that stand in at least *prima facie* tension with one another. The first idea is that moral knowledge—whatever else is true of it and even whether it exists at all—is not empirical knowledge. If there are moral truths, then the most fundamental of those truths are, like the truths of pure mathematics, available from the armchair. The second idea is that lack of experience can be a handicap in the acquisition of moral knowledge, and that experience of the world often proves crucial in its attainment.

Consider first:

**ARMCHAIR ACCESS:** Moral knowledge is not empirical knowledge.

This view is, of course, well represented in the philosophical tradition. Indeed, it is striking how little appetite there has been for full-blown empiricism about morality, even among those who were otherwise firmly committed to empiricist

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epistemologies. Classical ethical rationalists such as Clarke, Butler and Price regularly analogized moral knowledge to mathematical knowledge in their writings, with the latter understood as the paradigm of a priori knowledge.<sup>2</sup> But it was not only the canonical rationalists who made this comparison, but also John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the founding text of modern empiricism.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century, the logical positivists were committed empiricists who saw themselves as heirs to the tradition of Hume, Mill, and Mach; nevertheless, they took it as obvious that normative ethics is not a matter subject to empirical investigation. Unlike Locke, they refused to compromise their empiricism for the sake of ethical knowledge, and instead embraced non-cognitivism.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, those who have held that morality is a possible object of full-fledged knowledge have also held, for the most part and with some noteworthy exceptions, that such knowledge is a priori.<sup>5</sup>

This also seems to be the majority view among contemporary philosophers.

Thus, according to Michael Smith:

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<sup>2</sup> On the centrality of this comparison for the rationalist tradition, see Michael Gill, "Moral Rationalism vs. Moral Sentimentalism: Is Morality More Like Math or Beauty?", esp. section 2.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. Locke (1979 [1685]): 643-645. On Locke's quasi-rationalism about ethics in the *Essay*, see Ayers (1993): 187-188.

<sup>4</sup> The *locus classicus* is Ayer (1936), Chapter VI. But the view was also the official view of the Vienna Circle; on this point, see Carnap, (1962): 81.

<sup>5</sup> Among canonical figures writing after the distinction between empiricism and rationalism assumed center stage, Mill is a plausible exception. Among contemporary philosophers, prominent exceptions would include Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Railton (2003), and Sturgeon (1985).

It is agreed on nearly all sides that moral knowledge is relatively a priori, at least in the following sense: if you equip people with a full description of the circumstances in which someone acts, then they can figure out whether the person acted rightly or wrongly just by thinking about the case at hand. (2000/2004: 203).

Indeed, we do not attempt to discover what people ought to do in particular circumstances by designing and performing crucial experiments; nor do we think that our moral beliefs are inductively confirmed by observation.<sup>6</sup> Experience does not appear to play an *evidential role* in our moral knowledge. In these and other ways, moral knowledge seems to resemble mathematical knowledge more than it resembles the kind of knowledge that is delivered by the empirical sciences.

ARMCHAIR ACCESS stands in prima facie tension with another common thought about moral knowledge: that experience frequently proves advantageous in its

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<sup>6</sup> On this point, the conventional wisdom is well-summarized by Sayre-McCord:

We don't seem to see, taste, hear, smell, or touch moral properties, nor do we seem to rely on common methods of empirical investigation and confirmation to discover them. Although we speak of feeling that something is wrong, or right, the suggestion that these feelings are extra or supra-sensory perceptions, the product of some special moral faculty, is hardly plausible. Despite the apparent dependence of moral properties on non-moral properties, the results of empirical investigation appear to be altogether irrelevant to the justification of our moral views (although not to their application). Our moral beliefs have, at best, it seems, only a tenuous connection to experience, a connection evidently established more by the moral convictions we bring to bear on that experience than by the untainted input of experience (1996: 139).

Compare Shafer-Landau:

I think we must admit that ethical evidence is different in kind from the sort we find in the natural sciences. Provided we are entitled to trust our senses, scientists can rely on them to supply evidence to test a wide array of hypotheses. Ethics cannot rely on sense evidence in the same way, for any moral theory is perfectly compatible with such evidence (2003: 112).

attainment. We believe that breadth of experience might put someone in a position to attain moral insights that would have eluded her were her experiences more impoverished. Something similar seems true at a collective level: a story of moral progress that we have made as a civilization that omitted reference to the consciousness-transforming experiences of certain historical events would, it seems, leave out crucial parts of the story. As Peter Railton remarks, “We are quite sure that we have gained moral knowledge from experience—both as individuals and as a society—but not sure we can explain exactly how” (1996: 61).

Let us call this idea:

**EXPERIENCE MATTERS:** Experience sometimes plays a crucial role in putting one in a position to attain moral knowledge.

One could, of course, respond to the prima facie tension between ARMCHAIR ACCESS and EXPERIENCE MATTERS by giving up on one or the other. But, although questions could be raised about either, I will proceed on the assumption that both are true, in order to pursue the question of how they might be reconciled. My hope is to illuminate the role of experience in moral knowledge by asking what that role could possibly be, given this assumption.

To assume as a working hypothesis that experience sometimes contributes to moral knowledge is *ipso facto* to assume that moral knowledge exists. That assumption is, of course, contentious. Although I will not directly address skepticism about moral knowledge here, the inquiry is not irrelevant to the question of whether moral knowledge exists. For the better our understanding of what moral knowledge would be like if it exists, the better position we will be in to address questions about

whether it exists at all. And it is among the aims of this paper to contribute to the relevant kind of understanding.<sup>7</sup>

I will not offer a general account of the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, or the conditions under which something is knowable from the armchair. Rather, I will proceed in the following way. Mathematics is an armchair discipline if anything is. In considering cases in which experience apparently plays an essential role in the acquisition of moral knowledge, we can ask whether experience sometimes plays the same role in the domain of mathematics. If we find that experience *does* play the same role in mathematics, then that will be a good reason to think that its playing such a role with respect to moral knowledge is consistent with ARMCHAIR ACCESS.

## 2. Enabling and Triggering

Let's begin by reviewing some relatively straightforward routes by which experience can contribute to the acquisition of moral knowledge, routes that are perfectly consistent with the knowledge thus acquired having a priori status.

First, experience might be needed in order to acquire various moral concepts. Plausibly, sense experience played an essential role in my acquiring the concept *murder*. And of course, if I did not possess that concept, I would not be able to believe that murder is wrong. Given that knowledge entails belief, I would not know

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<sup>7</sup> One might think that we already possess a passably adequate account of what moral knowledge would consist in: true moral beliefs held in wide reflective equilibrium, or a sufficiently good approximation to wide reflective equilibrium. For some doubts about the adequacy of an account along these lines, see Kelly and McGrath (forthcoming).

that murder is wrong in the absence of the requisite experience. However, this dependence on sense experience has no tendency to show that my knowledge that murder is wrong is not a priori. For as proponents of the a priori have long emphasized, we should distinguish between the *enabling* role that experience plays in allowing one to grasp a certain content, and the *evidential* role that experience might or might not play in justifying one in thinking that the relevant content is true. The status of a given piece of knowledge as a priori or a posteriori concerns the latter, and not the former.<sup>8</sup> Nor does the fact that our moral knowledge is dependent on sense experience in this respect do anything to distinguish moral knowledge from mathematical knowledge. Presumably, our possession of many of the concepts that we employ in mathematical reasoning is similarly dependent on sense experience.

Beyond the role that it plays in the acquisition of moral concepts, one's experience of actual events might play a psychological role in prompting one to make moral judgments that one would otherwise not have made. For example, actually witnessing a certain method of execution might lead one to make the abstract moral judgment that the procedure is morally impermissible; if one's judgment is true and circumstances are otherwise propitious, that judgment will count as knowledge. Prior to the rise of Nazism in Germany, Albert Einstein was an absolute pacifist who maintained that the use of violent force was unjustified in any

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<sup>8</sup> The point goes back at least to Leibniz and is a commonplace in contemporary discussions of the a priori. See, e.g., Audi (1997: 100), Bonjour (1998: 9-10) and Boghossian and Peacocke (2001: 2).

circumstances. In response to the rise of Nazism, Einstein changed his mind and became convinced that there are at least some possible circumstances in which the use of such force is justified.<sup>9</sup> Let us assume for the sake of argument that Einstein's earlier absolutism was mistaken, and that his later view that there are at least some circumstances in which the use of force is permissible is both true and something that he knew. Perhaps this is something that he never would have come to believe if not for his having lived through the Nazi era; if so, then his experience of that historical event played an essential role in his acquiring this piece of knowledge. As Christopher Peacocke observes:

Reflections on historical states of affairs and current actual situations may lead us to formulate...principles and distinctions we might otherwise never have thought of. The same point applies to moral emotions. Our moral indignation at a state of affairs, or our sudden guilt in reflecting on one of our own actions, may lead us to moral reflections we might not otherwise have attained...(2004: 526).<sup>10</sup>

When experience leads to knowledge in this way, let us say that it plays a *triggering role* in the acquisition of that knowledge. For our purposes, there are two important facts about triggering. First, the fact that sense experience sometimes plays a triggering role in the acquisition of moral knowledge is not something that distinguishes moral knowledge from mathematical knowledge. Second, the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> On Einstein's early absolute pacifism and the subsequent evolution of his view, see Rowe and Schulmann (2007). As he clarified his new position in a later letter: "there are circumstances in which in my opinion it is necessary to use force...such a case would be when I face an opponent whose unconditional aim is to destroy me and my people" (Quoted in Rowe and Schulman, p.211).

<sup>10</sup> Peacocke emphasizes that such processes can give rise to knowledge that is a priori.

the acquisition of a particular piece of knowledge is triggered by sense experience does not mean that the knowledge thus acquired is a posteriori as opposed to a priori. Let us treat each of these points in turn.

The fact that sense experience sometimes plays a triggering role in mathematics is emphasized by Jaegwon Kim (1981), who notes that one might first come to grasp some abstract mathematical truth by (e.g.) visually perceiving the relevant relationship instantiated by concrete particulars. Consider, for example, a child who already possesses the concepts *two*, *three*, and *five* but is still in the process of learning arithmetic. Such a child might come to apprehend that  $2+3=5$  by counting pebbles; in this way, her experience of counting might prompt her recognition of the relevant mathematical truth. In these circumstances, Kim suggests that

...the role of perception is that of a causal cue of a certain kind, not as justificatory evidence, for the a priori truth apprehended through its aid. It is what triggers the human cognitive mechanism into appropriate action, and given the particular sort of cognitive apparatus that humans are genetically endowed with, certain types of perceptual stimuli may in fact be causally necessary to generate a priori knowledge (352).

But why should we think that the observation of the pebbles plays a merely triggering role, and not a genuinely evidential role, with respect to the proposition that  $2+3=5$ ? Here is a useful test that some have proposed.<sup>11</sup> Notice that once the child has recognized the relevant mathematical truth on the basis of her experience, it does not matter if it later turns out that the child had only dreamed of counting the pebbles (or even hallucinated that she actually counted them): she would still be

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<sup>11</sup> Kim, p.342; cf. Christensen and Kornblith (1997: 4), crediting Keith DeRose.



justified in believing the truth that she recognized in this way. This shows that here observation is playing an essentially heuristic role, as opposed to providing her with a piece of evidence or a confirming instance of the generalization that  $2+3=5$ .

The same holds true in the moral case. If a sufficiently vivid episode of merely imaginary acquaintance with some execution procedure would also have prompted one to recognize that it is impermissible, then it is a mistake to count one's actual experience of the procedure as observational evidence for the wrongness of the procedure. Moreover, this is so even if, due to limitations in one's imaginative capacities, the *only* way in which one could have pictured the procedure in sufficiently vivid detail is by actually having observed it.<sup>12</sup> As in the mathematical case, the role of experience here is heuristic as opposed to evidential.

### 3. Predictive Knowledge

An obvious way in which experience can contribute to moral knowledge is the following. The moral status of an action often depends, at least in part if not entirely, on its consequences, or its expected consequences. When an agent knows that some action would be the morally best thing to do, she typically has substantial knowledge as to what the consequences of that action would be, as well as substantial knowledge of the consequences of alternative possible actions.<sup>13</sup> But of course, we are not in a position to determine the consequences or likely consequences of an action a priori; rather, such knowledge requires evidence of how

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of such cases, see my (forthcoming a).

<sup>13</sup> A point on which G.E. Moore (1903), among others, laid great stress.

the world actually works. The more relevant experience one has, the more evidence one has to draw upon. Thus, the advantage possessed by the more experienced over the less experienced in the moral domain is simply this: they have greater knowledge, of a broadly inductive kind, about how the world works. And even if such broadly inductive knowledge is not needed to grasp the most fundamental or abstract moral truths, such knowledge is indispensable when it comes time to apply those more abstract moral truths in concrete circumstances. Thus, one's knowing that some possible token action is the right thing to do in particular circumstances typically depends on one's having a considerable amount of empirical knowledge, and those with greater experience will unsurprisingly tend to have more such empirical knowledge to draw upon and exploit.

It is natural to think that there is a deep difference here between morality and mathematics, for greater empirical knowledge about how the world works does *not* seem to be similarly advantageous in mathematics. Indeed, one might attempt to exploit this idea in order to explain the following apparent asymmetry: while a relatively impoverished experience of the world seems like a potentially serious handicap when it comes to moral thinking, it does not seem to be a similar handicap when it comes to engaging in mathematical thought at the very highest levels.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is questionable whether there is a deep epistemological distinction here, as opposed to the appearance of such a distinction created by certain quirks of our linguistic practice. We often reserve the term "mathematical knowledge" for

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<sup>14</sup> An asymmetry that was famously noted by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For further discussion, see Section 5 below.

knowledge of relatively pure mathematics. For example, we typically do not call discoveries made by physicists “mathematical knowledge”, even if those discoveries rest partially on mathematical considerations and partially on empirical considerations. In contrast, we do count my knowledge that *it is morally wrong to encourage children to smoke* as moral knowledge, even though it is based on a piece of a priori moral knowledge (that one should not encourage children to do things that are harmful to their health) and on a piece of non-moral, empirical knowledge (that smoking is harmful to one’s health). Indeed, this claim might seem to be as good a candidate as any for a paradigm of moral knowledge: it is the kind of thing that one might very well cite to students dismissive of the possibility of moral knowledge, in order to make it at least somewhat plausible that such knowledge exists. More generally, we seem much more willing to apply the term “moral knowledge” to pieces of knowledge that rest on a hybrid basis (part moral knowledge, part non-moral, empirical knowledge) than we are to apply the term “mathematical knowledge” to knowledge that rests on a hybrid basis consisting of part mathematical knowledge and part non-mathematical, empirical knowledge. Perhaps this is because pure mathematics is itself a systematic body of scientific knowledge (indeed, for most of Western history, the paradigm of such knowledge), so it is natural for us to reserve the term “mathematical knowledge” to refer to it. On the other hand, despite the best efforts of many moral philosophers, there is no comparably impressive a priori science of morality, for which it would be similarly natural for us to reserve the term “moral knowledge”; we thus apply the term “moral knowledge” much more liberally.

Thus far, we have distinguished three familiar ways in which experience can contribute to moral knowledge: by playing an enabling role, a triggering role, or by supplying evidence for non-moral propositions that subsequently inform one's moral thinking. Each of these is clearly compatible with ARMCHAIR ACCESS, given a natural interpretation of that claim. In the next section, I will examine a fourth way in which experience frequently contributes to moral knowledge. Because this way is perhaps less familiar, and also because it is less clearly compatible with ARMCHAIR ACCESS, I will consider it at greater length.

#### **4. The Sensitizing Role of Experience**

I will call the fourth way in which experience frequently contributes to moral knowledge the *sensitizing* role of experience. To a first approximation: experience might refine one's judgment to the point that subsequent exercises of that judgment are sufficiently reliable for its deliverances to count as knowledge. Although the sensitizing role of experience can be difficult to disentangle from the other ways in which experience contributes to knowledge in particular cases, it is not only distinct from but also irreducible to any of the others, taken either singly or in combination.

Again, according to Smith:

It is agreed on nearly all sides that moral knowledge is relatively a priori, at least in the following sense: if you equip people with a full description of the circumstances in which someone acts, then they can figure out whether the person acted rightly or wrongly just by thinking about the case at hand.

I assume that, in order to avoid triviality, we should interpret “a full description of the circumstances in which someone acts” as a full *non-moral* description of the circumstances in which the person acts, one that employs neither thick nor thin moral concepts. Of course, no one is ever given a complete non-moral description of a case: infinitely many details are left out. One is given a description that includes all of the features that are potentially morally relevant, together with the (perhaps implicit) stipulation that nothing morally relevant has been omitted. To the extent that the moral status of the person’s action depends on its consequences and those of alternative actions that she might have performed instead, such information is included in the description; thus, the advantage that superior experience might provide discussed in the last section is absorbed here.

Still, even if the information provided *determines* whether the person in the case acted rightly or wrongly, some who encounter that information might be in a position to attain knowledge on its basis (“just by thinking”) in a way that others are not. Compare: I know certain simple geometrical truths, from which a mathematician could prove a certain complicated theorem. Am I in a position to know the theorem? Perhaps there is a sense in which the answer to this question is affirmative. In particular, the information that I currently have is enough (for someone) to know the theorem; it is not as though any supplementary information is required. If, however, I lack the requisite mathematical competence, then there is

a clear sense in which I am not yet in a position to know the theorem in the way that the mathematician is.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, someone might possess a full description of a case in Smith's sense without yet being in a good position to attain knowledge of whether the person acted rightly or wrongly. For an extreme example, consider a philosopher who judges actions by explicitly applying a badly mistaken normative theory to descriptions of cases, one that frequently yields mistaken verdicts. Because the philosopher's way of arriving at these verdicts is so unreliable, it is natural to think that he lacks knowledge even on those occasions when he does arrive at the correct answer.

If one is sufficiently unreliable, one does not know, even if one possesses grounds that would be sufficient for knowledge were they possessed by a more reliable person. Call this *the minimal reliability condition* on knowledge. I take it that this condition holds for knowledge in general, irrespective of domain. Notice that one can endorse the minimal reliability condition on knowledge even if one thinks

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, considerations of this sort once led Saul Kripke to suggest that it might be profitable to eschew talk of "a priori truth" altogether, in favor of a more relativized notion :

[An a priori truth] is supposed to be something which *can* be known independently of any experience. That means that in some sense it's *possible*...to know this independently of any experience. But possible for whom? For God? For the Martians? Or just for people with minds like ours?...It might be best therefore, instead of using the phrase 'a priori truth', to the extent that one uses it at all, to stick to the question of whether a particular person or knower knows something a priori or believes it true on the basis of a priori evidence (1980: 34-35).

that reliability is neither necessary nor sufficient for having justified beliefs about some subject matter. Moreover, one can endorse the minimal reliability condition even if one has no appetite for the project of analyzing the concept of knowledge in terms of reliability, or rejects standard reliabilist accounts of knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Crucially, whether someone in fact satisfies the minimal reliability condition with respect to a case might depend in part on whether she has had suitable past experiences, where this is *not* a matter of those past experiences providing her with evidence on which she can now draw. Of course, past experiences might render someone sufficiently reliable by providing her with evidence on which to base her judgment. For example, by observing your past behavior, I might gain evidence that puts me in a position to make reliable judgments about your future behavior; if circumstances are favorable in other respects, then these beliefs will count as knowledge. Perhaps even if I subsequently forget the original evidence but retain

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<sup>16</sup> Among other things, standard reliabilist accounts of knowledge (see especially Goldman 1979 and 1986) are *externalist* accounts, while a theorist might accept the minimal reliability condition even if she requires that a subject base his beliefs on internally available justifying grounds in order to know. On the other hand, a theorist who accepts the minimal reliability condition *is* committed to the claim that appeals to the concept of reliability in epistemology are not fatally undermined by “the generality problem” (see especially Conee and Feldman 1998). But I think that this claim is safe: as Williamson (2000: 100) notes, surely historians can sensibly ask which of their sources are reliable. Of course, any theorist who is a reliabilist will presumably accept the minimal reliability condition. Shafer-Landau (2003: 272-302) defends moral reliabilism, at least concerning our “verdictive” moral beliefs; he discusses the generality problem in the context of moral epistemology on pp.280-285.

my beliefs, then those beliefs can still count as knowledge; if so, it is natural to think that their status as such depends on my once having had sufficient evidence.<sup>17</sup>

But not all cases are of that kind. Consider the following (non-moral) example. Some baseball managers and scouts possess an unusual skill: they are able to make extremely precise and accurate estimates about the velocity with which a pitcher is throwing the ball. In the context of the game of baseball, this is very useful: because the effectiveness of a pitcher can vary greatly with relatively small differences in velocity, the ability to recognize that (e.g.) a pitcher who is usually capable of throwing a 95 mile per hour fastball is now throwing in the lower 90s can make all the difference with respect to questions about which strategy to employ. This ability is not, of course, something that anyone is born with, nor is there some specific technique that one learns to apply. Rather, acquiring the skill typically involves, not only having observed a great deal of baseball, but also having had the opportunity to *calibrate* one's own estimates about velocity against the readings of a radar gun. By comparing one's initial estimates against the readings of the radar gun, one receives feedback about the accuracy of one's estimates, and this puts one in a position to make suitable adjustments. In this way, one can over time increasingly refine one's judgment for accuracy and attain a greater degree of precision.

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<sup>17</sup> Harman (1986) emphasizes the importance of "forgotten evidence" cases. He holds that, in a case in which one's original grounds have been lost, it is normatively appropriate to retain one's belief even if those grounds were bad ones. This view is consistent with the view that such a belief is not a candidate for knowledge.



Consider then someone who has acquired the ability in this way. On a particular occasion, he correctly recognizes that a pitch travelled to home plate at a velocity between 90 and 92 miles per hour. If he were insufficiently reliable at making such judgments, then this belief would not count as knowledge even if it were true. The fact that he is now in a position to recognize that the pitch traveled at a certain velocity is due to his having had the relevant past experience. However, it is not a matter of his past experience having provided him with evidence that the pitch he just saw was moving at a certain velocity. After all, it is not as though he has somehow retained memories of particular past pitches of known velocities which he can now call up and compare in his mind's eye with this most recent pitch. Nor is it a matter of applying to the present case some general technique for estimating velocities that he has learned. Rather, his past experience has instilled in him a certain competence, a competence that he can now bring to bear in the present case. Experience has honed his "eyeball" estimates to the point that such estimates are now sufficiently reliable to qualify as knowledge, provided that other conditions are met.<sup>18</sup>

Those who hold that there is genuine moral knowledge should allow that experience can play a similar role in the moral domain. For example, one's

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<sup>18</sup> Williamson (2007) argues that past experience plays a similar role in our "imagination based-knowledge of counterfactuals". From this, he draws the conclusion that in such cases the knowledge we possess does not admit of illuminating classification with respect to the a priori/a posteriori distinction. The idea of knowledge as the typical output of competence in judgment is central to the recent work of Ernest Sosa (2007).

recognition that a given action would be morally right or wrong is often mediated by the recognition that the action would fall under a certain thick ethical concept, and one's dexterity with such concepts is not independent of one's past experience, in ways that go beyond the mere provision of information that one treats as evidence. Quite apart from providing evidence, one's past experience influences the range of cases to which one is willing to apply the concept by conditioning one's judgment; it thus influences how reliable one is with the concept. In this way, one's past experience can determine whether one is in a position to recognize that the concept applies to a particular case, and thus, whether a correct verdict constitutes knowledge. Someone who has participated in many close friendships might be in a better position to recognize which disclosures of a friend's personal information would constitute betrayals and which would not, where this is not simply a matter of (e.g.) having accumulated more evidence that bears on the question of how the friend is likely to be affected.

One might balk at extending this model to the moral domain. For even if one agrees that in the baseball case the role played by experience is not that of enabling, triggering, or providing evidence, one might object that there is a crucial difference between that case and cases which involve the exercise of one's moral judgment. In the baseball case, there is an instrument (the radar gun) against which one can calibrate one's own judgment. The needed feedback is provided by comparing one's initial guesses with the readings of the instrument, which one treats as the authoritative standard. By contrast, one might think, there is simply no analogous possibility in the moral case. Of course, how one applies a given moral concept (e.g.,

*cruel*) depends in part on one's past experience: that one of us but not the other is willing to apply it to a borderline case might very well depend on subtle differences in our respective histories. But crucially, when one reaches a moral verdict about a particular case, the world typically does not provide feedback about whether one has applied the relevant concepts correctly. There is thus no genuine opportunity for calibrating one's moral judgment.<sup>19</sup>

However, we should not underestimate the extent to which feedback is available in the moral domain.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most significant source of such feedback takes the form of the moral opinions of others, opinions that we can compare to our own. Just as one can treat the radar gun as providing a standard against which to measure one's estimates of velocity, one can treat the verdicts of trusted others as providing data that bear on the accuracy of one's moral opinions. The point is not just that what others believe about some issue might influence what one believes about that very issue, although that much is certainly true. Rather, the point is that one's experience with others can influence one's underlying moral judgment in ways that make a difference downstream, affecting the verdicts that one reaches in future cases.

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<sup>19</sup> An objection of this kind is forcefully pressed by Daniel Jacobsen (2005: 400) in the course of his argument that "the skill model of virtue" that he attributes to John McDowell (1979) and others is subject to important limitations. The position that Jacobsen criticizes is considerably more ambitious than the one I offer here.

<sup>20</sup> The possibility of feedback in the moral domain is a theme in the work of Railton (2003), although his conception of the mechanism is rather different from the one that I sketch in this section. Although I cannot expand on the point here, I believe that these differences are relevant to the question of whether the knowledge that such feedback helps to produce still qualifies as "armchair knowledge" in any interesting sense.

Of course, the possibility of treating the moral opinions of others as feedback against which to calibrate one's own judgment immediately raises questions about the quality of that feedback. When one brings one's estimates of velocity into line with the readings of a well-functioning radar gun, one can be justifiably confident that one is *improving* one's judgment by doing so. But when one allows one's own moral judgment to be shaped by the feedback provided by the opinions of others, how can one be confident that this is likely to constitute an improvement? Indeed, how can one know that such influence isn't making things worse?

While there are a number of deep issues here, none of them threatens to undermine the line of thought that is currently under consideration. I have claimed that experience can contribute to moral knowledge in a way that is not a matter of enabling, triggering, or providing evidence. This is consistent with the fact that some courses of experience will not improve one's moral judgment, and indeed, are likely to impair or corrupt it. To take an extreme example: a child whose parents are devoted members of the Aryan Nation grows up in an environment in which the people whose opinions it is most natural for her to treat as a standard against which to measure her own are unreliable guides. She is thus at risk, not only of inheriting specific misguided opinions, but of ending up with a warped moral judgment in virtue of having developed that judgment against a defective standard. In the same way, one might calibrate one's estimates of velocity against an unreliable or malfunctioning radar gun and thus end up worse off than ever.<sup>21</sup> It is no part of our

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that there are no important differences between the two cases. Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that the fact that our relative lack of independent

pre-theoretical ideas about the connection between experience and morality that more experience is advantageous in the attainment of moral insight, regardless of the nature or quality of that experience. On the contrary, it is a commonplace that prolonged exposure to a morally corrupt environment is likely to have pernicious effects. This is perfectly consistent with the claim that experience frequently contributes to moral knowledge in its sensitizing role.

Note that the same is true of experience in its evidential role. After all, experience sometimes provides us with misleading evidence, and one's possessing such evidence might very well preclude one from knowing the truth. This has no tendency to undermine the idea that experience often plays a role in knowledge acquisition in virtue of providing non-misleading evidence. Similarly, the fact that an unfavorable course of experience might affect someone's moral judgment in such a way that subsequent exercises of that judgment are less likely to yield knowledge has no tendency to cast doubt on the idea that experience sometimes contributes to moral knowledge in virtue of its role in sensitizing one's judgment.

Of course, if one is generally skeptical about moral knowledge or moral truth, then one will be skeptical about the claim that calibrating one's moral judgments against the opinions of others could ever lead to moral knowledge downstream. From a skeptical perspective, such calibration at best serves to get the members of a community on the same page, but does not get anyone closer to the truth, or in a

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access to the moral facts—in assessing the reliability of others in the moral domain, we inevitably fall back on our own moral reasoning and judgment—has important implications for a number of topics, including moral disagreement and our attitudes towards “moral expertise”. See McGrath (2007), (2009) and (forthcoming b).

better position to know. However, anyone who is *not* generally skeptical about moral knowledge should allow that the mechanism described here can play a role in its acquisition.

In this connection, it is worth noting that one need not be a moral realist in order to accept the picture on offer. For example, according to Bernard Williams (1986), moral truths, unlike the truths that the natural sciences aim to discover, are not part of “the absolute conception of the world”. Nevertheless, members of certain moral communities have a kind of ethical knowledge. This knowledge consists in correctly recognizing that the thick ethical concepts that have currency among members of the community apply in particular cases. Someone who holds a picture of this kind can and should acknowledge that experience contributes to moral knowledge in the way described here.

One reason for thinking that the kind of experiential feedback described here plays a significant role in shaping one’s moral judgment is the following: the hypothesis that it does so offers an understanding of fundamental moral disagreement that is superior to standard cognitivist alternatives. For example, suppose that you and I disagree about whether a certain action would be morally wrong. Notoriously, it seems that this disagreement might survive any improvement in our knowledge of the non-moral facts: indeed, even if the non-moral facts are simply stipulated to be thus and so, we might still disagree. On some views, in these circumstances either (i) our disagreement must at least in principle be rationally resolvable through a priori reflection (i.e., at least one of us must have failed to adequately “unpack” our shared concept), or else (ii) the words “morally wrong” in

my mouth must express at least a subtly different concept from the same words in yours, and we are actually talking past one another. But in some cases of apparently intractable disagreement, neither of these options will seem attractive as a diagnosis of what is going on.

First, particularly if our disagreement takes place against a relatively extensive background of agreement about which actions are correctly described as “morally wrong” and which are not, the suggestion that we actually express different concepts by the words and are talking past one another will seem quite implausible. For surely two people can share a concept even if they are not in complete agreement about its extension. Does it follow that one of us simply needs to reflect harder on the concept that we share, in order to see that the other is actually correct about whether it applies to the case at hand? However, just as disagreement might persist even where there is no disagreement about the non-moral facts, so too it seems that disagreement might persist even if two people of high intelligence and good will reflect on their concepts as well as they can. Of course, one might simply insist that if convergence is not forthcoming, then it follows that at least one of the two must be guilty of having engaged in defective deliberation. But it is hard to see why we should agree that this *must* be the case.

Here is an alternative account. The fact that we reach different verdicts might be due to subtle differences in the way that our faculties of judgment have been conditioned by our past histories. If that is indeed the explanation, then it is unsurprising that there is no further piece of non-moral information that could be supplied to us now that would resolve our disagreement. For the way in which our

past histories underlie our current disagreement is not that of having supplied us with different evidence upon which we base our verdicts (something that could presumably be overcome by our acquiring further evidence, or by simply stipulating the non-moral facts). Rather, our past histories shape the way in which we respond to the non-moral information that both of us possess.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, given the role that our past experience plays in explaining why we apply the concept in the way that we do, there is no reason to think that even ideally conducted rational reflection on that shared concept would result in convergence.

My claim is that experience sometimes plays a sensitizing role in the acquisition of moral knowledge, not that it plays this role whenever moral knowledge is acquired. After all, in principle, a person might satisfy the minimal reliability condition for knowledge in a way that does not depend on her judgment having been conditioned in the relevant way. When experience does play a sensitizing role, is this compatible with the knowledge that is acquired being “armchair” knowledge for the relevant subject? I believe that it is. At least, we have no more reason to deny this, than we have to deny that a mathematician who proves a theorem has armchair knowledge, in a case in which her ability to execute the proof depends on a general competence acquired in part through past mathematical experience. The mathematician has developed certain skills through past practice,

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<sup>22</sup> Compare: if you and I carefully observe the same pitch, your visual impression might be more or less qualitatively indiscernible from my visual impression. Everything that is currently available to us, for purposes of estimating the velocity of the pitch, might be exactly the same. Nevertheless, we might very well make different estimates, where the fact that we do so reflects difference in our past experience.



and this puts her in a position to acquire knowledge in the present case that would otherwise be unavailable to her. But these past experiences do not provide evidence for the mathematical propositions that she is now in a position to know from the armchair. Similarly, it might be that the only reason that a person is currently in a position to know that a particular action would be morally wrong depends on her having had certain experiences of the world, events that sensitized her judgment. It does not follow that the knowledge at which she arrives is empirical knowledge, in the sense of knowledge that is based on observation or observationally acquired evidence. It is knowledge that is available from the armchair, no less than the mathematician's.

## 5. Conclusion

Consider again

**EXPERIENCE MATTERS:** Experience sometimes plays a crucial role in putting one in a position to attain moral knowledge.

and

**ARMCHAIR ACCESS:** Moral knowledge is not empirical knowledge.

I have surveyed some of the ways in which experience contributes to moral knowledge. Even if a person's ability to recognize that a moral concept applies to a case depends on any or even all of these mechanisms, the knowledge at which she arrives might still resemble the traditional paradigms of a priori knowledge more closely than the traditional paradigms of a posteriori knowledge. Indeed, one might wonder whether what has been said here makes mathematics and morality seem *implausibly similar* in the extent to which they admit of armchair investigation.

In Section 3, we noted in passing the natural thought that, while a rich experience of the world seems advantageous for achieving moral insight, lack of such experience does not seem to be a significant handicap when it comes to mathematical reasoning or insight. The apparent contrast (or at least, a closely related one) was already noted by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

...while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found...The cause is that...a young man has no experience (1142a12-1142a20).

Among mathematicians, it is something of a commonplace that mathematical breakthroughs are disproportionately made by the relatively young; certainly, their seminal contributions are well represented in histories of mathematics. In *A Mathematician's Apology*, G.H. Hardy famously remarked, "No mathematician should ever allow himself to forget that mathematics, more than any other art or science, is a young man's game" (1940/1992: 70). While such claims are often based on anecdotal evidence, more systematic empirical investigation seems to bear them out, at least to the following extent: on average, mathematicians make their first significant contributions earlier in life than researchers in any other academic field, by a significant margin (Simonton 1991: 126). Typically, when Hardy's remark is contested, it is contested for its apparent suggestion that those who are not young are incapable of doing outstanding work in mathematics—it is simply conceded that

lack of age and relative inexperience are not handicaps for engaging in mathematical thought at the very highest levels.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, someone might hold that experience matters more for morality simply in virtue of supplying evidence for non moral propositions that then inform one's moral thought. On this view, the truths of pure mathematics and the most fundamental, abstract truths of morality are on a par with respect to the importance of experience; experience becomes more important for morality only when one attempts to apply the most fundamental moral truths. However, the sense might persist that, even when it comes grasping the most fundamental truths of morality, a rich and varied experience of the world is advantageous, in a way that it is not especially advantageous with respect to the ability to do pure mathematics. This might lead someone towards either: (i) full-blown empiricism about morality, a view on which experience can supply evidence for the most fundamental truths of morality, or (ii) the view that experience contributes to moral knowledge in some still further way, beyond any of those that I have discussed.

However, there is a third possibility. In surveying some of the ways in which experience can put one in a position to acquire armchair knowledge, I have offered very abstract characterizations of the relevant mechanisms. Because of this, it is quite likely

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Guterman (2000) and Hersh (2001). The contemporary number theorist Noam Elkies is the youngest person ever to receive tenure from Harvard University. When asked about the relationship between his youth and the achievement for which he was awarded tenure, he offered the following reply: "One does not have to have any experience raising children through school, dealing with family tragedies, and so forth, to be able to find three numbers whose fourth powers add up to another number that is raised to the fourth power"(Quoted in Guterman 2000).

that a label such as “triggering” or “sensitizing” covers relatively diverse phenomena. It might be then, that even if (e.g.) experiential triggering is important for both mathematics and morality, there are significant differences between typical instances of triggering in the two domains. And these differences might make it the case that a rich experience of the world is advantageous for grasping the most fundamental moral truths, but not similarly advantageous for grasping the abstract truths of mathematics.

Let us make this last possibility more concrete. The suggestion that experiential triggering is more *common* in the moral domain than in mathematics does not seem particularly plausible. For cases of triggering in mathematics would include, for example, all of those cases in which the visual perception of physical inscriptions on a piece of paper or marks on a chalkboard puts one in a position to acquire mathematical knowledge. Triggering would thus seem to be an absolutely pervasive part of mathematical practice as it is actually conducted.<sup>24</sup> Still, this leaves open the possibility that experiential triggering in the moral domain often occurs in response to striking variations in one’s experiences, in a way that differs from typical instances of triggering in mathematics. Consider, for example, the kind of dramatic shifts in a person’s moral views that might be prompted by encountering individuals extremely different from those with whom the person is familiar (say, with respect to race, sexual orientation, or economic circumstances).

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<sup>24</sup> Perhaps triggering would not play much of a role in mathematical inquiry were such inquiry conducted by mathematicians who were idealized in various respects. (Consider, for example, mathematics as conducted by mathematicians with unlimited memory capacities.) But by the same token, much of the need for triggering in the moral domain presumably issues from the fact that we are less than ideal moral reasoners.

Encountering an individual of a different sexual orientation, or who is mired in abject poverty, might prompt a change in the person's moral views, even if no change would have occurred if the person had simply been presented with a hypothetical scenario that included a character with the relevant features. Perhaps there is nothing analogous to this in paradigmatic cases of triggering within mathematics. If so, then this might be a way in which a rich of experience of the world matters more for morality than for mathematics.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of the phenomenon of "moral conversion", see my (forthcoming a)

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