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# Moral Skepticisms

*Walter Sinnott-Armstrong*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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*To Geoff*

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# Preface

I have always held strong moral beliefs. Growing up in Memphis, I discovered early on that other people held their moral beliefs just as strongly as I held mine, even when we disagreed. Some of these people were then and remain now my close friends. These conflicts made me wonder whether they or I (or both or neither) were justified in our respective moral beliefs. That wonder led to this book.

When I first came to philosophy, I hoped to rule out moral nihilism and to prove my own moral beliefs. I thought that I succeeded in my undergraduate thesis on Kant's ethics. That was long ago. In this book, I argue that moral nihilism cannot be ruled out by any method and that moral beliefs can be justified only in limited ways.

Some readers will find my conclusions disappointing or threatening. They still want to establish their moral beliefs thoroughly, conclusively, and objectively. At least they want to refute moral nihilism. In contrast with scientists who feel free to ignore or make fun of skeptical hypotheses like Descartes' deceiving demon, most moral believers and theorists feel driven to fight moral nihilism. They are not satisfied by merely setting aside moral nihilism as irrelevant. That ploy strikes them as too arbitrary.

I respect their endeavor. Sometimes I share the urge to refute moral nihilism and moral skepticism. However, when I work through the details of moral epistemology carefully and consider extreme positions charitably, I don't see how to rule out moral nihilism. This inability leads to another: Many people cannot obtain the kind of justified moral belief that they long for. This is an important limit on the epistemic status of our moral beliefs. We ought to face that limit honestly.

Facing our epistemic limits need not lead us to accept moral nihilism. I am not a moral nihilist. I believe that some acts are morally wrong. I even feel confident in specifying some of the acts that are morally wrong. None of this changes when I admit that I cannot disprove moral nihilism or when I adopt my moderate moral skepticism.



Other people will still feel disappointed and threatened by my conclusions. However, this opposition should diminish when I show how our moral beliefs can be justified in modest ways. It should also help to distinguish moral epistemology from substantive ethics, because second-order beliefs about the epistemic status of moral beliefs cannot force us to give up the moral beliefs that we need to live well.

So, I hope that my readers will engage in this enterprise with an open mind. I will discuss and endorse some extreme positions, but these positions should not be rejected too quickly just because they seem weird or dangerous. They and the arguments for them need to be assessed carefully and fairly so that we can all end up with an accurate view of when, how, and how much our moral beliefs can be justified.

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# Acknowledgments

This book benefited from the generous and insightful comments of so many people that I am bound to forget to thank many of them. I apologize in advance.

The penultimate version of the manuscript was read by Russ Shafer-Landau and another reviewer for Oxford University Press, both of whom provided extremely helpful guidance. The previous version was discussed by a reading group at Dartmouth College, organized by Roy Sorensen and also attended by Julia Driver, Bob Fogelin, Bernie Gert, Joshua Gert, Jim Moor, Matthew Nudds, and Kathleen Wallace. Their profound challenges to my ideas are appreciated. The version before was read by Robert Audi, who straightened me out on a number of important points.

Parts of this book derive from earlier articles that received careful scrutiny from various readers. Published comments by Simon Blackburn and Mark Nelson were especially useful. So were conversations with (in addition to those already listed) Alexander Bird, Paul Bloomfield, Michael Bratman, David Brink, David Copp, Jonathan Dancy, Jon Ellis, Terry Horgan, Sam Levey, Don Loeb, Ram Neta, Diana Raffman, Mike Ridge, Bruce Russell, Geoff Sayre-McCord, Jonathan Schaffer, John Skorupski, David Sosa, Christie Thomas, Mark Timmons, Bill Tolhurst and Tim Williamson. In early stages of this project, I learned a great deal from participants in a Humanities Institute and two conferences at Dartmouth College, including (in addition to many of those already listed) especially Mitch Haney, Richard Hare, Stephen Jacobson, John Konkle, Chris Kulp, Paul MacNamara, Peter Railton, Stefan Sencerz, Ernie Sosa, Bill Throop, John Tresan, Margaret Walker, Doug Weber, Michael Williams, Susan Wolf, and Nick Zangwill. In later stages, I was helped by audiences at Dartmouth College; the American Philosophical Association; the Australasian Association of Philosophers; the Research School of Social Science at the Australian National University; Monash, Ohio State, Princeton, and Wayne State Universities; and the Universities of Auckland, Bristol, Cambridge, Connecticut, Edinburgh, Glasgow, North Carolina at Greensboro, Nebraska at Lincoln, Oxford, Reading, St. Andrews, and Stirling.

At the end, fellowships at the Center for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics in Canberra and at the Princeton Center for Human Values enabled me to polish the final version.

I am also grateful for permission to use earlier publications in this book. Parts of chapters 1 and 4–6 derive from Sinnott-Armstrong 1996a. Section 2.2 descends from Sinnott-Armstrong 2000a. Section 3.3 is based on Sinnott-Armstrong 1995a. Chapter 5 owes a lot to Sinnott-Armstrong 2004a. Chapter 7 revises Sinnott-Armstrong 2000b. Section 8.1 is based on Sinnott-Armstrong 1999e. Chapter 9 builds on Sinnott-Armstrong 2001b and 2002c.

Although it will become obvious as I present my views, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my debts to the writings of some great philosophers. My Pyrrhonism is inspired by Bob Fogelin. My coherentism is due to David Brink and Geoff Sayre-McCord.

I am also grateful for the encouragement of wonderful editors at Oxford University Press, including Robert Miller, Peter Momtchiloff, and Peter Ohlin.

My heartfelt thanks to you all.

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## ISSUES

In 2003, two adults flew from their home in the United States to Canada in order to get married. Like most married couples, they had sex on their wedding night. This couple was unusual only insofar as both were male. Because of that, many observers think that their marriage and their sexual act were morally wrong. Others believe just as strongly that these particular acts were not morally wrong. Some view their acts as beautiful expressions of a moral ideal of love. A few people who knew about their acts formed no moral opinion at all about what these individuals did.

At a higher level of generality, many people believe that terrorism is always immoral. Others believe that this general kind of act is not immoral in a few special circumstances, such as when terrorism really is the only way to secure the basic human rights of a large population. Some others suspend belief about such unusual situations, so they also suspend belief about whether all terrorism is morally wrong.

At an even higher level of generality, utilitarians and Kantians disagree about the fundamental principles of morality and about whether consequences or intentions count at all in determining what is morally right. Many students study these debates carefully but still cannot make up their minds about which theory, if either, to accept.

Moral controversies like these raise higher-order questions about the formation and status of moral beliefs: If I have not yet reached any opinion about the morality of affirmative action, for example, how should I decide what to think? If I do come to believe that affirmative action is immoral (or morally permitted or morally required), is my belief justified? Can other people be justified in believing the contrary? Can anyone know whether affirmative action is immoral? How?

These questions arise even without disagreement. Almost everyone agrees that experimental surgery on conscious humans without anesthesia or consent is immoral. We also get a lot of agreement on generalizations such as that it is immoral to break promises without adequate reasons. But how can such moral



beliefs be justified? Do we know that they are true? If some people disagree, what would or could or should we say to or about these deviants? Could we show them that their unusual moral beliefs are false or unjustified? How?

Such questions lie at the heart of moral epistemology. Whereas substantive ethics is about what is morally right or wrong or good or bad, moral epistemology asks whether and how anyone can know or be justified in holding substantive moral beliefs. The questions of moral epistemology arise at a higher level, for they concern the epistemic status of our substantive moral beliefs in general. These questions lead into fundamental issues about the nature of morality, language, metaphysics, and justification and knowledge in general.

When applied to ethics, these abstract issues are not just theoretical. They also have practical importance. Debates about when, if ever, an employee health plan should pay for abortions often turn on disputes about whether someone can know that abortion is morally wrong (or not). If nobody can obtain knowledge or justified belief about such controversial moral issues, then this might make it seem unfair to treat people differently on the basis of such beliefs, as employers do when they insist that health plans not pay for abortions. (Cf. Lockhart 2000.)

Similarly, hospital ethics committees often decide when terminal patients may (and may not) be taken off life support. Contrary moral beliefs are sometimes held strongly by relatives of the patients, so why should such decisions be handed over to ethics committees? One natural answer is that those ethics committees are more likely to be more justified in their conclusions about such moral issues, maybe because they are more impartial or less emotional or better informed. That answer obviously depends on some view about when moral beliefs are justified. Theories about justified moral belief might, then, affect how we organize ethics committees in order to make their moral conclusions as justified as possible.

Political theorists face similar issues when judges use their moral beliefs in overturning laws that were passed by elected legislatures and supported by public opinion. Why should judges have the power to impose their moral beliefs on so many people who disagree? One natural response is that the special position of judges makes them more justified in trusting their moral beliefs (maybe because they are better informed or less subject to unfair political pressures and self-interest). That response, again, depends on assumptions about what makes moral beliefs justified.

Moral epistemology also affects education. Most people agree that public schools should teach respect for other groups, cultures, and ways of life, but many parents balk at teaching respect for gay couples (with or without children). Before schools can feel comfortable teaching values that conflict with the values of parents, policy makers might need to decide which values can be justified well enough to be taught in the public schools of a free society. In these and many other ways, our public debates and institutions are deeply affected by our views on whether, when, and how moral beliefs can be justified.

Even in our personal lives, we often need to decide which moral claims to believe and how much confidence to place in them. Should you commit civil disobedience in support of a cause that seems just? Should you tell the spouse of a friend who is having a secret affair or report someone who is illegally downloading

software or child pornography? Your decisions might sometimes hinge on whether you think that your moral belief is justified well enough. If you think that there can be reasonable disagreement on the moral issues, you will probably be less inclined to make a big deal out of it.

Most generally, when a moral problem is serious, many people want to have some belief about it. They do not want their moral belief to be arbitrary. They want it to be justified. The questions are whether and, if so, how and to what extent they can get what they want. Those are the basic questions for moral epistemology and for this book.

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# What Is Moral Epistemology?

The field of moral epistemology lies in the intersection between the larger territories of moral theory and general epistemology. Accordingly, this chapter will lead into moral epistemology by surveying moral theory in general and then moral skepticisms in particular.

## 1.1. Moral Theory

Any division of moral theory is bound to be controversial, but a framework can help in comparing various views. For this purpose, moral theory is often divided, first, into substantive ethics and meta-ethics.

Substantive ethics<sup>1</sup> includes claims and beliefs about what is morally right or wrong, what is morally good or bad, what morally ought or ought not to be done, and so on. These claims and beliefs might be about acts, states of character, persons, policies, institutions, or laws. They might be about particular cases or about general kinds. They might or might not be combined into moral systems, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. Anyone who makes or implies any such claim is to that extent doing substantive ethics.

Some claims that seem substantive turn out to be true by definition. For example, if a speaker claims that murder is wrong and then defines murder as wrongful killing, the speaker's claim says only that wrongful killing is wrong. That does not tell us anything about which particular acts are wrong, since any act of killing that the speaker does not consider to be wrong will not be classified as murder. A theory in substantive ethics might include some claims like this and

1. This field is often called "normative ethics." I prefer "substantive ethics" because moral epistemology is also normative in a different way, as we will see.

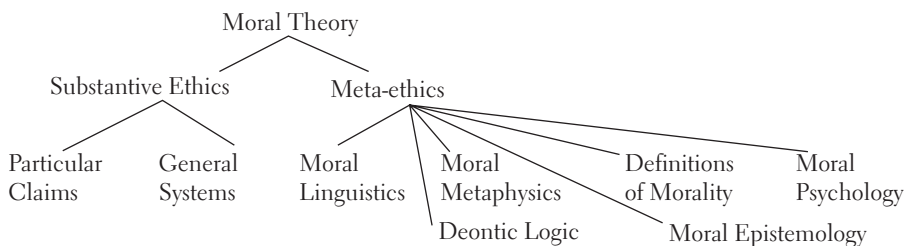


FIGURE 1.1.

some definitions, but it must also include some non-definitional claims about morality to count as a substantive moral theory.<sup>2</sup>

Meta-ethics then asks about the nature or status of substantive moral claims, beliefs, and theories. One prominent area of meta-ethics has been the study of moral language. When a speaker says, “Abortion is immoral,” one might ask what this sentence means, what effect this utterance causes (or usually causes or is intended to cause), or what speech act is performed. Such questions are often said to fall under *moral semantics*, but semantics concerns meaning, so it does not strictly include theories about speech acts and effects, which fall under *pragmatics*. That makes it more precise to describe this area of meta-ethics as *moral linguistics*.

There is much more to meta-ethics than moral linguistics. Meta-ethics also includes *moral metaphysics*, which asks whether any moral properties and facts exist and, if so, what metaphysical status they have. These metaphysical issues are separate from moral linguistics, since moral language might refer to moral facts and properties even if no such facts or properties exist (just as a child can describe Santa Claus despite his non-existence).

There are also debates about *the definition of morality* as opposed to religion, law, custom, and so on. *Moral psychology* then asks about the nature and sources of moral beliefs and moral emotions, such as guilt and shame, as well as about our motivation to be moral. *Deontic logic* studies forms of argument or inference or reasoning that depend on the normative and evaluative terms in substantive moral claims. *Moral epistemology* is yet another area of meta-ethics, which concerns roughly whether, when, and how substantive moral claims and beliefs can be justified or known. These sub-fields are diagrammed in figure 1.1. Moral philosophers also discuss other issues, including moral authority or reasons to be moral, but this incomplete picture should be enough to impart some sense of the variety of issues within moral theory.

2. Some opponents might claim that all true moral judgments are true by definition, but this claim could not be plausible unless the proffered definitions were theoretical definitions like “Water is H<sub>2</sub>O.” I am referring, instead, to dictionary definitions. On these kinds of definitions, see Fogelin and Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 368–72.

Of course, these divisions of moral theory are questionable. Some philosophers reject any distinction between substantive ethics and meta-ethics. It must be admitted that this line is often blurred. One reason is that many claims in moral theory are unclear and combine parts from different areas. Unclear conjunctions are often hard to classify. Moreover, some claims that are supposed to be neutral among all substantive moral theories are really neutral among only some but not other substantive moral theories. The distinction between substantive ethics and meta-ethics might, then, be seen as a matter of degree depending on the range of positions among which a certain claim is neutral.

The different sub-fields within meta-ethics are also often hard to distinguish. Ontological conclusions are often drawn from semantic premises. Semantic analyses of moral language can be tested by their ability to explain the validity of inferences or to fit within some formal semantics of deontic logic. Definitions of morality determine the range of emotions to be studied in moral psychology.

Such connections, conflations, and confusions should not cause concern here. Nothing I say will depend on any hard and fast line between substantive ethics and meta-ethics or between moral epistemology and other sub-fields of meta-ethics. Indeed, if someone insists on avoiding the word “meta-ethics” altogether, that would not affect my arguments. All I need from these distinctions is an initial, rough map of the terrain that surrounds the field to be explored in this book.

## 1.2. Epistemology Applied to Morality

The central topic here is moral epistemology, which is just epistemology applied to substantive moral beliefs. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief in general. It asks whether, when, and how people can know or be justified in believing anything. Moral epistemology asks these questions about moral beliefs in particular. Answers to such questions make second-order claims about the epistemic status of first-order moral beliefs.

Of course, we cannot determine whether any claim is justified or known if we have no idea what that claim means, so moral epistemology depends in some ways on moral semantics. Moreover, some philosophers (including Hare 1965, 1981; and Habermas 1990) try to justify moral beliefs by appealing primarily to a theory of moral language, so moral epistemology might be based on moral semantics. The same might be said for moral ontology, the definition of morality, deontic logic, and moral psychology. Nonetheless, moral epistemology differs from other areas of meta-ethics in that it focuses directly on knowledge and justified belief in morality and brings in other issues only when relevant to these central concerns.

Moral epistemology is also distinct from substantive ethics. Both fields ask whether something is justified, but they ask this question about different kinds of things. Moral epistemology asks whether *beliefs* are justified, whereas substantive ethics asks whether *actions* (or policies, institutions, etc.) are justified. For example, the question of whether I am justified in breaking the speed limit to get to class on time is a question of substantive ethics, but the question of whether I am justified in believing that I am justified in breaking the speed limit to get to class on

time is a question of moral epistemology. People can be epistemically unjustified in believing that an act is morally justified, such as when they believe that capital punishment is morally justified, and they believe this only because they read it in a book that they are not epistemically justified in trusting. (This can happen whether or not capital punishment really is morally justified.) People can also be epistemically justified in believing that an act is morally unjustified, such as when they have a trustworthy basis for believing that capital punishment is unjustified. (Again, this can happen whether or not capital punishment is morally justified.) All of this shows that being epistemically justified is separate from being morally justified.

Similarly, people can have epistemic reasons for moral beliefs without moral reasons for action, and vice versa. Some philosophers do seem to assume that nobody can have a reason to do an act without having any reason to believe that he has a reason to do that act. Others assume that, if an agent has a reason to believe that there is a reason for that agent to do a certain action, then that agent does have a reason to do that action. I find both assumptions dubious. Moreover, even if reasons for action did follow from reasons for belief and vice versa, a reason for an action would still be distinguishable from a reason to believe in that reason for action, since the reasons have different objects. One is about actions. The other is about beliefs. That is enough to separate the fields of substantive ethics and moral epistemology.

These distinctions, admittedly, get confusing. Suppose a critic claims that it is morally wrong for colleges to use racial quotas in admissions. A defender of affirmative action quotas asks, "Why?" This question asks for some kind of reason or justification, but it is not clear whether it asks for a reason against the racial quotas themselves or, instead, for a reason for the belief that the racial quotas are morally wrong. In response to the former question, the critic might point to features of the racial quotas that make them morally wrong in his opinion, such as that some applicants will be affected adversely although they personally did nothing wrong. Then he is offering a reason not to use the racial quotas, which is a reason for action. In contrast, if the question "Why?" is interpreted differently, a critic of the racial quotas might say that he has studied racial quotas long and hard, consulting with many students and experts, and this long process has made it obvious to him that these racial quotas are immoral. This is not directly a reason for action. Instead, he is offering a reason for his belief, that is, a list of sources or factors that make him justified in believing that the racial quotas are immoral. These reasons for belief are facts about him (including his beliefs), whereas the reasons for action were facts about racial quotas. Other kinds of reasons for belief might seem closer to reasons for action. Sometimes a reason to believe that an action is morally right (or wrong) is a *belief* that the action has certain properties, and the *fact* that the action has those properties is a reason for (or against) doing the action. Since to state the fact is to express the belief, it is then hard to tell whether a speaker is referring to the reason for belief or, instead, to the reason for action. That explains why so many people conflate these distinct kinds of reasons. It is often not clear which kind of reason is being sought when someone asks "Why?" or which kind of reason is being given when someone answers that question. But here we need to

avoid such confusions and unclarity. If we do, then moral epistemology can be distinguished from substantive ethics.

These fields are still related, insofar as an adequate moral epistemology must cohere with the best substantive ethics. Nonetheless, theories in moral epistemology are supposed to be neutral among competing substantive moral views, just as logic, semantics, and general epistemology need to be neutral among competing views in history or biology. When people disagree about the morality of abortion, they often want a method to resolve their dispute or a test of whether either view is justified. Moral epistemologists study and sometimes propose such methods and tests. To avoid begging the question, these methods and tests must be neutral among the views under dispute. Of course, some theories in moral epistemology are not really so neutral. Maybe no theory in moral epistemology can be completely neutral among all possible substantive moral views. Even so, some theories in moral epistemology can still be neutral among the competitors in a particular dispute. Then they might be useful in choosing among those particular alternatives. That would help a lot, but it remains to be seen whether even that much can be accomplished. If so, then moral epistemology is distinct from substantive ethics at least in such contexts.

Whether or not its questions can be answered independent of substantive ethics, moral epistemology at least asks distinctive questions. Indeed, several different questions that are not directly about substantive ethics are asked and answered within moral epistemology. A first question concerns *conditions* for justified belief and knowledge in morality. Some moral epistemologists attempt to spell out necessary or sufficient conditions for a person to be justified in believing a moral claim or to know that a certain moral claim is true. A second question concerns practical *procedures* or *methods*. Some moral epistemologists propose steps that a person can or must go through in order to gain justified moral belief or knowledge. A third question asks how we can *show* that moral claims or beliefs are true or justified or known. A fourth question asks about *degrees* to which moral beliefs can be justified—which are justified better or best—while admitting that different beliefs are justified also but not as well. Still other moral epistemologists ask parallel questions about justifications or arguments or epistemic virtues or reliability regarding moral beliefs, each of which is different from the question of when moral beliefs are justified.

All of these questions are important and lie within moral epistemology, but we cannot discuss all of them at once. In this book, I will focus on the questions of which conditions are necessary or sufficient for moral knowledge and for a person to be justified in believing a substantive moral claim.

### 1.3. Varieties of Moral Skepticism

The primary challenge in moral epistemology is posed by moral skepticism. However, many very different views have been described as moral skepticism. The best way to explain the particular kind of moral skepticism that will concern us here is to contrast it with the other views that sometimes go by the same name.



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