

## **Moral Knowledge as Know-How**

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This chapter discusses the idea of moral knowledge as “know-how” embedded in our social practices. When we consider the possibility that (at least some of) our moral knowledge is embedded in (at least some of) our social practices, there are a number of important questions that arise. In this chapter, I’ll consider two:

Question 1. What does it mean to say that moral knowledge is “embedded” in our social practices?

Question 2. What is the nature of this knowledge?

In what follows I will start by considering the first question (§1) and then turn to the second (§2). Throughout the course of the chapter, I will suggest that there are a number of features of our social lives that support the idea that moral knowledge is embedded in our social practices and that at least a portion of that knowledge is best thought of as moral know-how involving capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions to behave in certain morally-relevant ways.

### **1. Is moral knowledge “embedded” in our social practices?**

First, it is worth noting that the claim that moral knowledge is *embedded* in certain social practices seems to be a stronger claim than just that certain social practices *reflect* or *exemplify*, or have been (at least partially) *shaped by*, our moral knowledge. Rather, the use of the term “embedded” implies that certain social practices *contain*, or *have incorporated*, moral knowledge, which has become an essential part or characteristic of the practices themselves. In

other words, the claim is that certain social practices are more than just *products* of moral knowledge. They are, in some meaningful way, *possessors* of it.

Now, it strikes me that if this is true, there are a number of things that should rather straightforwardly follow. While there are likely to be more, I will restrict my exploration here to three such things—specifically, that it would be the case that:

1. We are able to meaningfully gain moral knowledge by engaging in the relevant social practices (and/or those social practices can impart moral knowledge onto those of us that engage in them).
2. The moral knowledge contained in those social practices can meaningfully come apart from (and even potentially conflict with<sup>1</sup>) the moral knowledge possessed by the individuals within the community from which they originated.
3. Engaging in those social practices creates meaningful opportunities for further moral growth and advancement—i.e., the discovery and development of new moral knowledge and/or the application of existing moral knowledge to new behaviors and social practices.

Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, the claim that *we are able to meaningfully gain moral knowledge by engaging in the relevant social practices—and/or those social practices can impart moral knowledge onto those of us that engage in them*. Among other things, this suggests that one important way we learn about morality, including *how to be moral*, is by watching and imitating other members of

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<sup>1</sup> Assuming the standard (at least in philosophy) view that knowledge is generally factive—I say “generally” because, as we will see, it is not clear whether this applies to know-how—the claim here is not that one source of knowledge *directly contradicts* another, but rather that it *stands in tension* with another, having the potential to generate internal (and external) conflicts or dilemmas by, for example, creating a situation in which there are competing moral considerations. This will be discussed in more detail throughout the chapter.

our community as they engage in the relevant social practices (a claim that most developmental psychologists working on moral development would heartedly support).<sup>2</sup> Watching and imitating daily social practices helps us to learn, for instance, how resources, responsibilities, and burdens are appropriately shared within the family and larger community, how others are to be treated, etc. In this way, we are able to see what honesty, loyalty, generosity, bravery, and compassion *look like*<sup>3</sup>, as well as when and how they are to be displayed—and to whom.

Because what we observe is not the idiosyncratic actions of one individual, but rather shared patterns of behavior across a range of individuals—for example, observing our parents, teachers, neighbors, and other community members all engaging in similar displays of respectful greeting towards one another—we come to recognize these behaviors as *practices*, part of the social architecture within which we live and engage with others in daily life.

One worry about this is that it is not clear that learning to participate in something that I recognize as a social practice *by itself* will necessarily impart moral knowledge. Perhaps I do so, for example, simply because I notice that “everyone else is doing it”.<sup>4</sup> It would seem that in order for my participation to impart *moral* knowledge, I would need to not simply recognize the behavior that I am engaging in as a social practice, but also (at minimum) as a social practice that possesses a particular kind of *normative significance*. In other words, I would have to recognize

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<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of early moral development, see Killen & Hart (1995), Killen & Smentana (2013). See also chapters from Snow’s (2015) recent *Cultivating Virtue*—in particular the chapters by Narvaez, Thompson, and McAdams—and Churchland (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, “see” and “looks like” can be being used in several different ways. Here, the argument would be for a form of moral perception, where it is through the observation of social practices that certain kinds of moral knowledge can be gained—to be later reinforced through imitation and practice. See McBrayer (2010) for a discussion of different uses of perceptual terms in his “limited defense” of moral perception, as well as Blum (1991), Cuneo (2003), Wright (2007), and Audi (2013), among others, for defenses of moral perception more generally—though, see also, Dancy (2010), Huemer (2005), Jacobson (2005), Hills (2015), among others, for a more critical/alternative perspective.

<sup>4</sup> I recently watched a “hidden camera” social experiment video that highlighted the ease with which we do this—start participating in social practices simply because everyone else around us is doing it, even though we have no idea *why* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEhSk71gUCQ>).

the social practice as not being merely statistical in nature—generated, maintained, and enforced through the sheer frequency of its occurrence—but rather, as existing because of its importance for, and connection to, our individual and collective moral needs, values, and welfare.

Luckily, such recognition seems easy enough to come by, under normal circumstances. It may occur all on its own—e.g., I observe the respectful or compassionate nature of the practice—but, if not, it is easily facilitated through the various forms of moral instruction and conversation that normally accompany our social practices, especially when we are learning them. I participate in the common greeting practice of my culture, for example, because I have been told (and observed) that to do so is *respectful*, something I further recognize as being valued enough to have become embedded in a common social practice in which I have learned to participate.

Of course, this raises another important issue, which is that even if I gain moral knowledge through engaging in such a practice—I learn that doing such and so is a way to respectfully greet others and, thus, I greet others in this way because it is respectful—this does not necessarily mean that I gain *moral virtue*. My engaging in a practice because it is respectful is, after all, not the same thing as my engaging in it because being respectful is of value to me *for its own sake*, because it is right thing to do. Perhaps it matters to me to be respectful because that is what other people value and I don't want to disappoint or risk offending someone (or a myriad of other reasons, some not so benign). Thus, even if we are able to gain moral knowledge through our social practices, this fact by itself cannot speak to what we will do with that knowledge or why.

Yet, it seems that there are several different morally-relevant things to be learned through our social practices. Consider—as children, we learn to be respectful by greeting people in a

certain way, we learn to be compassionate by comforting a friend in the same way we have seen others comforted and have been comforted ourselves, we learn to be generous by helping family and friends cook meals for the less fortunate of our community, and by being encouraged to give from our own valuable possessions to those in need, etc. What is it that we have learned?

First, we have learned that certain practices (or sets of practices) *are ways of being* respectful, compassionate, and generous. Of course, these are not the only ways of being respectful, compassionate, and generous—indeed, we are likely to encounter *other* ways of being so along the way. And being active pattern generators and identifiers (Churchland 2000, Clark 2000), we are likely to cluster these different ways of being respectful, compassionate, and generous together into we might call “meta-practices” (or “schemas”), which, arguably, helps to further illuminate the underlying nature and significance of the moral knowledge contained within the practices themselves.

Second, as mentioned earlier, to the degree to which we observe these practices engaged in commonly—by many people across many different occasions—we learn that these ways of being respectful, compassionate, and generous *are valued* by our community. This implies not only that we too, as members of that community, should value them, but it provides motivation to learn/discover new ways of being respectful, compassionate, and generous.

Third, by engaging in these practices ourselves, we learn *what it is like* to be respectful, compassionate, and generous. And to the extent that engaging in these practices creates positive feedback loops—e.g., I give my much-loved stuffed bunny to another child who lost her home and, in seeing her face light up with joy and gratitude, experience the happiness of *having* the stuffed animal surpassed by the happiness of *giving* it to another—we come to *experience* the value of these practices and become motivated to continue engaging in them, not just because

others expect us to, but *for the sake of that value itself*.

Herein, then, lies an important key for addressing the worry stated above. Insofar as these positive feedback loops link up our engagement in social practices to our internal motivations, they provide the necessary (though not sufficient) “kick-starter” for the development of virtue, a development which will serve to further reinforce our valuing of and engagement in those social practices.<sup>5</sup>

Let us turn now to the second claim—that *the moral knowledge contained in social practices can meaningfully come apart from (and even potentially conflict with) the moral knowledge possessed by the individuals within the community from which they originated*.

There are essentially two directions that this “coming apart” (and potential conflict) might occur:

1. Certain individuals within a community possess moral knowledge that diverges from that contained in existing social practices—thus, problematizing them as outdated, inadequate, or unacceptable.
2. Existing social practices contain moral knowledge that diverges from that possessed by certain individuals—thus, problematizing it as outdated, inadequate, or unacceptable.

The first of these seems relatively straightforward, even commonplace. Indeed, at times it seems that the very definition of moral progress in modern society is the constant critical re-evaluation of existing social practices. Practices that were once viewed as appropriate demonstrations of respect or politeness, for example—such as a man holding open a door for a

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<sup>5</sup> These feedback loops are not unlike those involved in other forms of skill development. See, however, Russell’s (2015) worry about the inevitable complexity and “messiness” of such feedback loops, especially, though not exclusively, in the case of virtue development.

woman or referring to a child as “having autism” instead of “being autistic”<sup>6</sup>—are regularly challenged as outdated and not appropriate (or “politically correct”). Importantly, this is often not because those who originally started the social practices were misinformed or mistaken, but rather that our understanding of the moral values they have helped us to navigate have continued to change and evolve—as thus, arguably, should our social practices.

The second direction follows naturally from the first—as our social practices shift to capture our ever-evolving understanding of important moral values, it is inevitable that those practices will encounter individuals who have not yet “caught up”. For them, the now outdated social practices are still genuine expressions their moral knowledge, even though others around them may fail to experience and receive them as such.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to recognize that such situations are not typically a simple matter of one person being mistaken and the other correct—rather, they are complex situations that involve competing moral considerations. Consider, for example, the already mentioned practice of men holding doors open for women. More specifically, imagine an older gentleman arriving at a building at the same time as a younger woman and holding the door open for her, a gesture that she finds insulting—under the presumption of gender equality, such a practice treats women differently than men, i.e., as the “weaker” sex—so she responds harshly.

Here we can see the clash between (at least) two competing moral considerations. First, it seems clear that the practice of holding the door open—if done only for a woman *because* she is

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<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion of the latter, see Silberman’s (2015) *Neurotribes* or Solomon’s (2012) *Far From the Tree*, which both provide fascinating discussions on our social practices centered around our understanding (and misunderstanding) of “disability”.

<sup>7</sup> Another reason why social practices can spring up and/or die has nothing to do with the moral knowledge they contain, but with the value placed on that moral knowledge. For example, over the years I’ve noticed that one of the greeting practices, once employed ubiquitously in Cambodia, is becoming less common. This is arguably not a sign that the practices viewed as appropriate for expressing respect for social position have changed—it’s not being replaced with an alternative practice—but rather that the importance of expressing respect for social position has itself changed. People typically don’t consider it as important, at least in certain contexts.

a woman—is not respectful in an ideal world (i.e., within a society that *is*, in fact, gender egalitarian). Thus, in order to treat the younger woman respectfully (as an equal) the older gentleman should not hold open the door. Yet, it would be a mistake to not nonetheless recognize his gesture as a *genuine* display of respect. After all, holding doors open for women is a social practice—a way of *being respectful*—that this man likely learned as a young boy, a practice he has engaged in all his life. And so, in holding the door open for the young woman, he was communicating to her his respect, making it an appropriate thing to do.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of such moral complexity, Calhoun (2000) argues that the appropriate response is one of *civility*—to recognize, appreciate, and express tolerance for the divergence in moral perspectives (and resulting social practices) that is common in a morally imperfect and evolving world, such as our own. As such, the young woman’s hostility seems ill-placed.<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting version of this divergence can be found in Churchland’s (2000) recent discussion of moral progress, which he argues can largely be located within our “expanding universe” of social practices. “A primitive villager of Levant,” he writes, “...could aspire to many things, perhaps, but he or she could not aspire to be... a labor lawyer... a child psychologist... a law professor...” all of which “constitute new contributions to the well-being of mankind...” (302). Relevant to our discussion, however, is the worry that while we have expanded the breadth and depth of the social practices within which we can engage, the moral knowledge they contain *has largely failed to change us* in morally-relevant ways—a worry that

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<sup>8</sup> As he becomes aware of the changing norms, the man will have to choose between continuing to engage in a practice that, for him, he experiences as a genuine display of respect and adapting his practices to be more in alignment with what he recognizes as the important moral value of gender equality. More generally, Calhoun’s (2000) important work on the virtue of civility highlights the fact that in a morally imperfect world, *communicating* or *displaying* moral values—such as respect—can often require engaging in socially recognized practices that may not actually be, based on our best moral understanding, consistent with those values.

<sup>9</sup> Though her hostility might be have been better placed if the person holding the door had been a younger man—someone raised with more gender egalitarian social norms—who should have “know better”.



Churchland acknowledges and endorses. Indeed, he notes that, “the moral character of an average North American is probably little superior to the moral character of an average inhabitant of the ancient Levant. The bulk of our moral progress, no doubt, lies in our collective institutions [and social practices] rather than in our individual hearts and minds” (303).

Whether or not we fully agree with this sentiment, it brings us back to the worrying limitation of the moral knowledge contained in, and imparted by, social practices discussed earlier, which is that while these practices may help us to behave more morally (respectfully, compassionately, generously, etc.), they may not, by themselves, *make us morally better people*.

While it is certainly possible for a community of people to largely engage in social practices not because they themselves valued being respectful or generous, but rather because they were valued by others, at some point we would have to wonder—*valued by whom?* More likely, perhaps, is a community in which people do generally value being respectful and generous, but merely for the social benefits they accrue, which includes the simple, but deeply important, benefit of being considered a member of the tribe.

Yet this too strikes me as unlikely, for the reasons mentioned above. It is hard to imagine our engagement in social practices not frequently creating positive feedback loops. And while some of these will surely be related to the social benefits (e.g., external praise received from others) associated with engaging in those practices, it seems likely—at least under normal developmental circumstances—that others would link up to the positive experiences generated *by the practices themselves*, eventually making engaging in them their own reward.

All of this aside, it is important to acknowledge that the social architecture that makes up our daily lives may contain a collective moral “wisdom” that the individuals guided and constrained by that architecture do not—that we live better, more moral, lives by virtue of the

social practices in which we are encouraged to participate.<sup>10</sup> In this way, our social practices become not just possessors, but *protectors*, of moral knowledge—just as, in our increasingly isolated and hectic lives, we would be at risk of forgetting the value of our friends and families if it were not for certain social practices (such as the celebration of Birthdays or family gatherings on Thanksgiving Day<sup>11</sup>) that encouraged us to remember.

This brings me to the third claim that *engaging in certain social practices creates opportunities for further moral growth and advancement (i.e., the discovery and development of new moral knowledge and/or the application of existing moral knowledge to new behaviors and social practices)*.

In a recent book on virtue, Annas (2011) wrote: “A boy will learn to be brave, initially, by seeing a parent chase off a dog, say, and by registering that this is brave. But right from the start he will see what his coming to be brave does not consist [merely]<sup>12</sup> in his chasing dogs off” (22). While not the point that Annas was making with this passage, I think it nonetheless highlights the fact that, to the extent that witnessing others’ behaviors (or practices) successfully imparts moral knowledge—in this case, that the parent’s chasing off of the dog was brave—that knowledge, once imparted, is not restricted to the behavior/social practice from which it was gained.

Consider the boy above. He witnessed his parent’s behavior and gained the moral knowledge that this particular action, the chasing off of a dog, was brave. But that is not all he gained, because he would have also likely registered his parent’s action as a *good* thing, in the

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<sup>10</sup> This aligns quite well with the view put forth by Alfano (2013), in which he argues that we should think of virtue and character as social constructs—they come into existence (and are maintained) through the architecture of social reinforcement.

<sup>11</sup> The problematic historical issues associated with this day aside.

<sup>12</sup> I think the “merely” here is important—certainly, his coming to be brave can include chasing dogs off, if the circumstances where that was necessary arose.

sense of keeping him safe and protected. And, harkening back to our earlier discussion, he would also likely have recognized (either then or later on) similarities between this particular action and other ways his parent keeps him safe and protected, as well as ways that other people more generally work to keep him safe and protected, as well as ways that members of his community as a whole come to the aid, sometimes with some risk to themselves, of anyone that is in a potentially harmful situation and is in need of safety and protection. And so on.

As we discussed earlier, if this boy notices that such behaviors are (fairly) widespread and occur with (at least some) regularity when situations in which they are called for arise, then he will recognize them as all part of a more general social practice (or set of practices)—something like *acting bravely when someone is in need of safety/protection*—which further implies that acting in such a way is something generally valued by his community. And it is not a terribly large step for the boy, as a member of that community, to want himself to *act bravely*, in whatever way is called for. Nor would he have that much further to go to value bravery, not simply because his community values it, but because it is valuable *in its own right*. As discussed above, such a connection would likely be made through his own experiences of acting bravely—e.g., when he stands up for a friend who is being bullied and sees his friend's gratitude and others' respect, when he dares to confront the monster in his closet without waking his parents (who is apparently scared off by this display of bravery because it is nowhere to be found) and feels a sense of pride and self-accomplishment.

Further, this process has the potential to spark an exploration and evaluation of all the different social practices intended to display bravery—the degree to which they actually do so and why, etc.—which will ultimately lead to the revision of old practices and/or the creation of new ones, thereby expanding my own and others' understanding of what it is to be brave, as well

as our collective desire to be so.

In short, I think Annas (2011) was right to point out that the boy, in witnessing his parent's action, sees more than just that *that action* was brave. Arguably, by virtue of the moral knowledge he gained through witnessing the action, he caught his first important glimpse into what bravery is and why it matters.

## § 2. What is the nature of this knowledge?

“...moral knowledge, if the strained phrase is to be used at all, is knowing how to behave in certain sorts of situations in which the problems are neither merely theoretical nor merely technical”. (Ryle 1949: 316)

When we consider what sort of moral knowledge might meaningfully become “embedded” in our social practices it makes sense to bring into our service the long-standing distinction between *knowledge-that* and *knowledge-how* (or “know-how”). This distinction has been cashed out in a variety of ways, and has been discussed alongside a variety of other distinctions, such as the distinction between theoretical vs. practical knowledge, and between semantic (or declarative) vs. procedural knowledge (for summaries, see Bengson & Moffett 2011, Bengson 2013, Fantl 2008, 2016). But roughly, what it comes down to is the difference between the “knowing” that is achieved through the possession of certain propositions (or “facts”), on the one hand, and the “knowing” that is achieved through the possession of certain capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions to behave in certain ways, on the other.

Of course, people disagree about the nature of knowing-how, relative to knowing-that. What has been dubbed the “anti-intellectualist” position (see, among others, Ryle 1946, 1949, Schiffer 2002, Noë 2005, Wallis 2008, Adams 2009, Devitt 2011) maintains that knowing-how

is essentially grounded in the possession of a set of capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions to behave in certain ways—ways relevant to the activity in question. While that know-how may link up in various ways with a body of relevant propositional knowledge (i.e., I may know a lot of facts about how to  $x$  and  $x$ -ing), possessing that propositional knowledge, by itself, is not sufficient for knowing-how to  $x$ .

Intellectualists, not surprisingly, argue that the anti-intellectualist position is untenable (Stanley & Williamson 2001). The reasons given vary depending on the intellectualist, but a few of the criticisms of the anti-intellectualist position include: that it fundamentally misrepresents the nature of propositional knowledge, which need not necessarily be consciously accessible and declarative in the way anti-intellectualists make it out to be (Fodor 1968, Stanley 2011), that knowing-that is often an necessary part of knowing-how (Snowdon 2004), and that under certain circumstances people are willing to both attribute know-how to people who lack the requisite capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions and fail to attribute know-how to people who possess them—strongly suggesting that capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions are neither necessary nor sufficient for knowing-how (Bengson, Moffet, & Wright 2009).

Consider an example. Because of where I grew up (near the Rockies, which afforded many different rock climbing opportunities for those so inclined), I possess a wealth of propositional knowledge about rock climbing—e.g., how and where it is done, what equipment, skills, and level of chutzpah are necessary to do it, etc.—even though I did not bother to learn to rock climb myself.

The question is: do I *know how* to rock climb? We might argue that, in a sense, yes. After all, I have a good degree of factual (and “theoretical”) knowledge about rock climbing—so, it seems acceptable to say that I know how to rock climb, if what we mean by that is that I *know a*

*lot about* rock climbing, including how it is done. Yet, it also seems perfectly appropriate for my rock-climbing friends to protest that clearly I don't know how to rock climb. After all, I have never gone rock climbing, nor could I (beyond a very basic level) do so successfully, even with all the factual/theoretical knowledge I possess.

While there are a number of responses to this that could be given by both sides of the debate—including finding ways to bridge the gap between them<sup>13</sup>—it strikes me that, whatever view one adopts, this example captures something very important about know-how. Even if we don't agree with the strong anti-intellectualist position that know-how always and only is the possession of certain capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions, it is nonetheless the case that much of the *value* of someone knowing how to do something, as opposed to merely knowing a lot about that something, is that *she can* (under the right circumstances) *successfully do it*.

When it comes to moral knowledge, this seems to especially be the case. Knowing everything there is to know about honesty, including how honesty “is done”, is of little value to anyone if we are unable to succeed in being honest when the circumstances require it. And *being honest* in any significant sense (i.e., not just by accident or for irrelevant reasons, but *because* and *whenever* the circumstances require it) certainly involves more than just the possession of a body of propositional knowledge<sup>14</sup>—it involves a host of other lower and higher level capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions, such as the ability to perceive when honesty is required, the motivation to be honest, the self-regulatory capacity to override contrary inclinations, and so on.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the absence of such capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions, it isn't clear how

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<sup>13</sup> As in Bengson and Moffett's (2007, 2011) account of non-propositional intellectualism, which would say that my knowing how to rock climb involves a non-propositional understanding (or *conceptions*) of rock climbing—more specifically, for me to know how to rock climb, I would need to stand in an *objectional understanding relation* to a way *w* of rock climbing.

<sup>14</sup> As the studies conducted by Rust and Schwitzgebel (2014), Schwitzgebel and Rust (2014) highlight.

<sup>15</sup> Much of this is captured by Snow's (2010) discussion of “social intelligence”, which she argues is foundational to virtue (virtues being a particular form of social intelligence).

much a body of propositional knowledge (including a set of moral facts, rules, principles, or maxims) would really matter.<sup>16</sup>

The same seems true at the social level as well. It is the exercise and expression of our moral knowledge in the form of *good* (honest, respectful, compassionate, brave, generous) *deeds* that has the most value. If encouraged and encountered frequently enough, these morally positive interactions become a normal part of our daily lives—of how we act and what we do—embedded in the social practices in which we collectively engage. In turn, such practices are readily encountered, witnessed, imitated, and performed, thereby perpetuating the cycle of virtue.

This is not to deny that propositional knowledge (e.g., moral rules/principles/maxims) has an important role to play. Even the most ardent anti-intellectualists acknowledge that propositional knowledge often functions as a guide in the development of know-how's capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions—if nothing else, it gives the moral learner a rough idea of what to aim for and why, providing a few essential heuristics, or rules-of-thumb (e.g., “honesty is the best policy”; “sharing is caring”) to follow. Without them, it may be difficult to know where/how to begin the process of developing the relevant capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1990, 1991, Varela 1999).

But, as Clark (1996, 2000) has elsewhere argued, such propositional knowledge not only helps the learner begin to navigate this socially shared “moral space”. More importantly, it plays a crucial role in *creating* that moral space to begin with. To see this, consider again the example of Annas' boy. In order for him to see beyond the concrete dissimilarities of different observed

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<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with the view put forth by Churchland (1996), when he argued for a “...portrait of a moral person as one who has acquired a certain family of perceptual and behavioral skills,” a portrait which “...contrasts sharply with the more traditional accounts that pictured a moral person as one who has agreed to follow a certain set of rules” (106).

instances of bravery—engaged in at different times in response to different threats by different people—to successfully identify the much more abstract feature(s) that links them all together, he needs the concept of *bravery*. According to Clark, concepts (such as bravery or generosity) are “mind tools” designed to capture abstract patterns of information that would otherwise remain undetectable beneath the surface dissimilarities, thereby bringing them to the surface and making them “observable” objects (see also Jackendoff 1996, Tse & Altarriba 2008).

The idea then, is that we can *see* that someone is being respectful, for example, across a range of different behaviors, each of which include very different sorts of surface information—e.g., your friend is being respectful both when shakes a stranger’s hand in greeting and when he allows his grandparents to serve themselves food before he does, even though both situations involved different actions (down to the body language and facial expressions) directed towards different people—because they both instantiate a shared abstract pattern, which we make concrete, and therefore observable, by introducing the concept of respect. It would make sense then that our social practices commonly include not only *behaving* in certain ways, but also *identifying, labeling, and discussing* those behaviors—in particular, for those who are learning, and most especially, when they happen to get it wrong.<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that our social practices successfully impart the moral knowledge they contain not only by inculcating in us a rich repertoire of capacities, abilities, and/or dispositions to behave in certain ways, but also by highlighting and unifying the core network of shared moral values around which those social practices are organized—creating, as Clark (2000) calls

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<sup>17</sup> As was the case when we first moved to South Carolina and my son was repeatedly chastised for failing to respond to his teachers (and other adults) with “Ma’am/Sir”—not only was this social practice regularly displayed for him to observe/imitate, but he was regularly reminded that it was an important display of *respect*. Interestingly, over time he came to experience as such—and continues to engage in it to this day, though he now lives in a part of the country where it is not as common.



it, a “situated moral epistemology” (hereafter, “moral community”). In other words, we collectively navigate and experience the moral space that we ourselves have created through the interactive relationship between our social practices and the internal and external dialogue that accompanies them.

The creation of this shared moral space (or moral community) is critical for at least two reasons. First, as Churchland (2000) notes, it opens up space of possibility—an opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of, appreciation for, and participation in the promotion of our individual and mutual welfare. Second, the social architecture of shared values and practices provides a necessary level of stability from within which this space of possibility can be explored.

Of course, the danger is that as much as these shared values and practices open up a space of possibility, they leave uncaptured and unexpressed a range of other ways of valuing and behaving. As Clark (2000) writes, “every choice of moral vocabulary is...restrictive, rendering other patterns invisible to all but the most breathtaking (‘revolutionary’) exercises of individual thought” (19). Likewise, our focus on certain practices (and not others) as the recognized expression of that vocabulary risks becoming unnecessarily dogmatic and repressive, blind to unique and organic expressions of our shared values—much less the exploration of new values, not necessarily widely shared. In other words, each moral community—by virtue of the nature of its *situatedness*—is at risk of not only generating and promoting moral knowledge, but also moral ignorance (Alcoff 2007, Grasswick 2016).

Unfortunately, as Alcoff (2007) and others have pointed out, even more worrisome types of ignorance are possible. As different moral communities emerge, group identities and structures of privilege (including *moral* privilege) also emerge, both between and within those

communities, which become reflected in their social practices. Such structures of privilege inevitably create variable “epistemic dispositions”, where ignorance becomes systematically linked to specific features—created and/or reinforced by social practices—of different groups of “knowers” (especially underprivileged) within the community. And as these existing social practices tend to support and reinforce themselves, this eventually results in epistemic distortions that deny—while at the same time supporting—the structures of privilege that gave rise to them. When this happens, ignorance is no longer the product of different kinds of limitations, but a “substantive epistemic practice” in itself (Alcoff 2007: 47; see also Mills, 2007).

These are worries that every moral community must take seriously. And as members of these communities, we must always keep in mind that as moral beings, we remain essentially *unfinished*. Thus, we must strive to strike a balance between the old and the new, recognizing that the stability provided to us by the social architecture we have created through our shared moral values and practices is useful only insofar as it serves as a platform from which to continue growing and developing as moral beings<sup>18</sup>—a process that will invariably require an on-going transformation of our social architecture.

Perhaps, then, the most important moral knowledge contained within our social practices is the knowledge that those practices are, and will always be, a “work in progress”.

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<sup>18</sup> Or, to put it in Annas’ (2011) terms, a platform from which to *learn* and *aspire* to greater virtue.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

For good relevant compilations, there is Snow (2010) *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology* on virtue and Bengson and Moffett (2014) *Knowing How: Essays on Knowledge, Mind, and Action* on know-how. There are several relevant articles in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary Volume 26: Moral Epistemology Naturalized*. For anyone interested in the epistemology of ignorance, see Sullivan and Tuana (2007) *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. I also recommend Calhoun's (2000) "The Virtue of Civility", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 29:3.

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