

## MORAL KNOWLEDGE, EPISTEMIC EXTERNALISM, AND INTUITIONISM

*Daniel Star*

### *Abstract*

This paper explores the generally overlooked relevance of an important contemporary debate in mainstream epistemology to philosophers working within ethics on questions concerning moral knowledge. It is argued that this debate, between internalists and externalists about the accessibility of epistemic justification, has the potential to be both significantly influenced by, and have a significant impact upon, the study of moral knowledge. The moral sphere provides a particular type of strong evidence in favour of externalism, and mainstream epistemologists might benefit from paying attention to this fact. At the same time, the terrain of moral epistemology (approached as a sub-field of metaethics) needs to be reshaped by the realisation that externalists can steal the thunder of intuitionists when it comes to knowledge constituted by seemingly self-evident beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to defend a view about the nature of moral knowledge that is not well-represented in contemporary studies of moral knowledge within ethics, but that might seem to be on the right side of an important divide to many philosophers working in general epistemology. This is a view of moral knowledge that takes externalism about the accessibility of epistemic justification seriously.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Stephen Kearns, Ofra Magidor, Nico Silins, Roger Crisp, Ralph Wedgwood, Robert M. Adams, Brad Hooker, Krister Bykvist, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘internalism’ and ‘externalism’ have been used to refer to a large number of different distinctions in philosophy. In ethics, ‘externalism’ is commonly taken to refer to the view that at least some practical reasons do not depend on any desires to act in ways that conform with the reasons that a person might presently possess, or would possess were he to fully rationally deliberate about the situation he is in (in contrast to Bernard Williams’s view that all practical reasons are ‘internal’, in the sense that they depend on desires the agent either presently possesses, or would possess were he to fully rationally deliberate; see Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons, with Postscript’, in Elijah Millgram [ed.], *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001], pp. 77–98). There are other important uses of the terms even within ethics (see Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], pp. 142–45 for

I believe that there is much to recommend in the epistemic externalist position I describe below on the way to arguing that some observations about morality speak in favour of this general externalist position. If the argument of the first section of this paper is on the right track, the fact that the externalist view has not received much attention from moral epistemologists is rather odd, because it seems to be the case that certain observations about moral beliefs, in particular, provide us with a particularly good rationale to favour this view. For the same reason, one might also think it is surprising that moral beliefs have not received more attention in general epistemology circles.

I argue that morality provides a better starting point when we look for examples that count in favour of epistemic externalism than a standard example that is often mentioned in the general epistemology literature, since that example much more easily admits of an internalist interpretation. In the second section of the paper, I turn to consider an alternative framework to the one that I favour. This 'intuitionist' framework might be thought to provide a better explanation of the observations about our moral beliefs that I contend are best explained by the epistemic externalist thesis. Intuitionism is popular in certain moral epistemology circles (where moral epistemology is treated as a sub-field of metaethics), but it is rather unpopular in general epistemology.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the main reason for its current appeal in some circles, which I isolate, actually speaks at least as much in favour of epistemic externalism (that does not require intuitionism) as it speaks in favour of internalist intuitionism.

### **Chicken-sexing and morality: The appeal of epistemic externalism**

The field of contemporary epistemology is awash with thought experiments that direct us to accept various theoretical conclu-

a survey of a number of important distinctions in ethics that have attracted the internalist/externalist labels). Some readers may need to bear in mind that the distinction I am focusing on in this paper is a distinction commonly made in epistemology, but not in ethics – it should not be confused with the distinction that divides internalists and externalists about practical reasons, or internalists and externalists about practical judgements.

<sup>3</sup> It is not uncommon to come across good philosophers outside of ethics who are unfamiliar with the way the term 'intuitionism' is used within ethics. This is not to deny the existence or value of a long and interesting philosophical tradition.

sions. Some such thought experiments seem decisive – one need only think of Gettier cases, reflection on which makes it *very* difficult to continue to accept that knowledge is justified true belief – but more often than not, such thought experiments will simply incline us towards accepting an important proposition. An example of a thought experiment that is often said to strongly incline us towards accepting a particularly controversial philosophical proposition is the chicken-sexing case. It is regularly provided as a (if not *the*) central example of a thought experiment that speaks in favour of epistemic externalism. I will argue here that ordinary, everyday morality actually provides us with a *better* source of examples that strongly incline us towards accepting epistemic externalism than the traditional chicken-sexing example does. If I am right about this, a surprising oversight on the part of epistemologists will have been uncovered.

Epistemic internalism is the view that whenever a person knows something, he or she is either aware of the justificatory basis of his or her knowledge or could become aware of this justificatory basis merely through reflection.<sup>4</sup> Epistemic externalists deny this: it is not necessary to either be aware of or be able to become aware of the basis of one's knowledge (merely through reflection) in order to count as knowing a proposition.<sup>5</sup> Say that someone asks me,

<sup>4</sup> A somewhat attractive variant of this definition is the view that whenever a person knows something, he or she is able to come to *know* the justificatory basis of his or her knowledge, merely through reflection (for a definition along these lines, see Duncan Prichard, *Epistemic Luck* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], p. 42). My definition has the virtue of allowing that awareness of something non-propositional in form (e.g. sense data) could count as awareness of a justificatory basis (which is not to say that I think such things do so count). For a good discussion of the debate between internalists and externalists about the accessibility of epistemic justification by someone that favours the internalist position see Laurence Bonjour, 'Internalism and Externalism', in Paul K. Moser (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 234–63. For an extended critique of this kind of internalism see Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of accuracy, I should note that it is very common to focus on internalism and externalism about epistemic *justification*, rather than *knowledge*. However, this does not matter for the purposes of the present paper. Internalism about justification, as it is usually defined (when writers focus on *awareness*), entails internalism about knowledge, as I have defined it (assuming that justification is always required for knowledge). Arguments against internalism about knowledge will thus be arguments against internalism about justification. In any case, the reader could replace nearly all mention of knowledge in this paper with mention of epistemic justification and the arguments would be roughly the same. I prefer to focus on knowledge because I think the common judgments about moral knowledge that I appeal to are judgments about knowledge and not about mere epistemic justification (partly just because ordinary folk less commonly think and talk about epistemic justification that can fall short of knowledge than they think and talk about

'What is the capital of New Zealand?' I spontaneously offer up 'Wellington.' Do I count as knowing that Wellington is the capital of New Zealand regardless of what I would say (truthfully) about *how* I might know this? To meet the internalist requirement, it might be enough that I would be able to say, 'I remembered it' (indicating that I am aware that my memory provides a solid basis for the belief) or 'Jack just told me' (assuming Jack just told me, and that I rightly believe Jack to be a reliable source of geographical information). The externalist denies that it is a necessary condition for counting as knowing a proposition that I be in a position to give such a story, even just to myself, about how I might know what I believe I know. Of course, the externalist need not – and, no doubt, should not – deny that I may sometimes be in such a position.

As I have said, the example that is most often first used to both illustrate the distinctiveness of epistemic externalism, and make it sound somewhat intuitively compelling, is the chicken-sexing example.<sup>6</sup> The story goes something like this (it does not matter for our purposes whether actual chicken-sexing is exactly as the story portrays it to be). Chicken-sexers are employed to sort chicks into male and female groups. This is an important job – or, at least, *was* an important job before the invention of machines that take care of the task more efficiently – because it is crucial to separate the chicks into those that will grow to lay eggs, and those that will grow to be most profitable in terms of selling on as meat. Once they have developed certain skills, chicken-sexers do this task amazingly well. However, they tend to be very bad at describing the basis on which they reliably distinguish between male and female chicks. It has been claimed that they actually do it on the

knowledge). My externalism about knowledge should not be confused with a mundane kind of externalism about knowledge that pretty much everyone accepts, i.e. the view that knowledge at least sometimes depends on truths that are external to agents. There is another, distinct (although related) use of the terms 'internalism' and 'externalism' that is common in contemporary epistemology, but that I am not concerned with here: internalism is sometimes taken to be the view that epistemic justification supervenes on states that are internal to agents (i.e. states that would be shared by intrinsic physical duplicates, however much their environments differ). The externalist counterpart to this is the view that epistemic justification partly supervenes on features of the environment that are external to the bodies of individual people.

<sup>6</sup> Prichard describes this example as 'the notorious "chicken-sexer" case that so divides externalists and internalists' (*Epistemic Luck*, p. 43). His book is a good example of a recent work that often uses the chicken-sexing case to focus on intuitions that might help in the internalism/externalism debate (see pp. 43–44, and pp. 174–177, in particular).

basis of smell, although they most commonly think they are doing it on the basis of sight. Nonetheless, it seems very tempting to conclude that when a chicken-sexer correctly judges that there is a male chick in front of himself, he knows that there is a male chick in front of himself, even supposing he has a mistaken belief about *how* he knows this (and no correct belief about how he knows this). It is tempting to think he counts as knowing there is such a chick in front of himself in virtue of the fact that his belief is not just luckily true, or in virtue of the fact that there is a reliable causal process in the world that enables him to make correct judgements about the chicks he encounters.

I contend that many mundane but important moral beliefs are good candidates for knowledge, despite the fact that people find it difficult or impossible to locate a satisfactory justificatory basis for the relevant beliefs. I think we may often be in a position that is similar to a chicken-sexer who seems to know the sex of the chicks she comes across, but does not feel able to offer an explanation of how she does so (or at least not one that is satisfactory or sufficient). We can easily imagine giving people a questionnaire with questions like the following on it: 'Is torturing someone just for fun (with no other justification) always wrong?', 'Is stealing something from a poor person just to augment one's already considerable wealth morally permissible?', 'Is lying normally right?', and 'Is intentionally killing a person normally wrong?' Just as a chicken-sexer must decide whether a chick is male or female, the person faced with these questions might be asked to decide whether she is faced with a true or a false claim, and with examples such as those just provided I think the results would be rather more predictable than in the chicken-sexing case.

Of course, the completed questionnaire alone would not establish that someone knows any of the relevant propositions, just as an instance of a reliable chicken-sexer case does not in itself establish that the chicken-sexer being considered possesses knowledge. I have described this questionnaire in order merely to establish a close analogy with the chicken-sexing case. Nonetheless, I do also think the relevant propositions are very plausibly cases of known propositions, and I would invite the reader to share that judgement.

In relation to the answers one might expect to receive to these questions, I think it is also true to say that further quizzing would reveal both a general degree of obstinacy about claims to know the relevant propositions (putting theoretical contamination

from relativist and sceptical trends in our culture to one side), and a common lack of an ability to provide an internally accessible justificatory basis for the relevant judgements (on reflection). Even after years of studying moral philosophy, I find it hard to locate a basis for my belief (which I am strongly inclined to believe constitutes knowledge) that intentionally killing a person is normally wrong.

Perhaps even more striking than this observation is the fact that many people would point to a completely *unacceptable* basis for their moral beliefs, yet we are unlikely to judge that they lack such basic knowledge. They are similar to chicken-sexers who claim to know the sex of chicks on the basis of sight, when they in fact know the sex on the basis of smell. I think it is best to use non-philosophical examples to push this point (even though it also applies to adherents of false philosophical moral theories), and the widespread adherence to religious ideologies provide us with a wealth of such examples. Take the belief of a fundamentalist Christian, Jack, that his knowledge of moral truths is based on reading the Bible, since the Bible is the word of God. It does not matter for my argument that sophisticated adherents of Jack's religion might believe that this is an incorrect belief for a Christian to hold; it suffices that a great many believers are like Jack. Now, take an adherent of another religion, Jill, who believes that her religious text, whose claims are inconsistent with the claims of Jack's favoured text, provides the foundation for her moral beliefs, since her text, and not John's, contains the word of God.

Clearly there are many Jacks and Jills in the world, and Jack and Jill can not both be right (even on the assumption that one of them is, which many people would doubt as well). There are many other kinds of religious examples; some people might think, for example, that they form their moral judgements as a result of direct communication with God, or his intermediaries. Many of us believe that all such examples fail to explain knowledge because we don't believe in God at all, but we would find it deeply offensive for a religious person of the kind we have imagined to claim that we lack first-order moral knowledge as a result of a failure to be sufficiently religious, and we certainly should not return the offence by claiming that religious people lack first-order moral knowledge. After all, (nearly) all religious people, and (nearly) all atheists will agree that intentionally killing people is normally wrong.

There are three reasons that I think ordinary morality provides us with examples that speak in favour of epistemic externalism to a greater extent than the chicken-sexing case does. The first is simply that there seems to be a lot of very ordinary moral knowledge about – which, like the putative knowledge available in the chicken-sexing case, is seemingly not accompanied by good, internally accessible justifications – while chicken-sexing is quite a rare profession. The second is that people passionately disagree about the justificatory basis of their moral knowledge (with more passion than one would expect from a gathering of chicken-sexers), but it seems highly desirable not to view this as interfering with much of their first-order moral knowledge.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the chicken-sexing story actually allows of an alternative internalist interpretation of a kind that is not available in the moral case. Its absence in the moral case strengthens the claim that the moral case is a better example for the externalist. Is it really true to say, of real life chicken-sexers, that no kind of internal justification is available to them? There seems to be one kind of good epistemic justification that is, in fact, straightforwardly reflectively assessable to them, and that is the positive feedback, which takes the form of the testimony and continuing support of their employers, to the effect that they are, in fact, almost always making the right judgements. Chicken-sexers know they are reliable.<sup>7</sup> This may be easily overlooked when the chicken-sexing example is considered.

In short, the fact that a chicken-sexer is provided with continual positive feedback about her work would normally mean that she does have internally accessible evidence that she knows the sex of the chicks that she is presented with. Here is one place where the analogy with morality crucially breaks down. No bells ring when one forms or acts on false moral beliefs; no one loses a job; no tight feedback loop can be located. A description of a chicken-sexing practice that would make it more like morality would be a practice where we are all kept in a factory and engage in making judgements about chickens, without ever hearing anything from beyond the factory line we are working on about whether or not we are doing our jobs well, yet still have firm intuitions that we know we are right some of the time.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, they may not know this when they are just starting out as chicken-sexers, but both internalists and externalists would agree that beginners are not the right subjects to focus on when attempting to make minimally contentious knowledge claims.

It might be said that convergence of agreement in judgements in the moral case might provide something of an analogous feedback loop to the one that would be available to chicken-sexers, but this seems highly questionable. If one were a chicken-sexer in the just redescribed case (i.e. a case where one toils away without receiving feedback as to one's degree of success), one might look to others to see whether they agree with the judgements one is making about particular chickens, but one would not be able to take their agreement as providing a ground for knowing anything (assuming epistemic internalism is true). There is no way of ruling out the possibility that convergence would indicate that we are all getting it wrong, rather than all getting it right. In the moral case, one can actually provide many examples where convergence or universal agreement goes along with patently false first-order beliefs, e.g. judgements concerning the supposed moral inferiority of women which, we might suppose, were almost universal in the not too distant past.

I think there are two main things a critic might say in response to my argument that the moral domain provides better examples than the chicken-sexing case, insofar as the goal of persuading us of the desirability of the epistemic externalist position is concerned. Firstly, the critic might contend that morality is actually a poor source of examples because of the tenability of moral scepticism (as distinct from scepticism in general), on philosophical grounds. I have been assuming that there is a lot of moral knowledge around in the world that needs explaining, but is this not highly questionable? To this I would simply say that we are trying to come up with examples that test our pre-theoretical intuitions (i.e. intuitions relatively uncontaminated by philosophical theory) at this stage in the dialectic. Pre-theoretically at least, people actually have *very* strong intuitions that they know that torturing someone merely for fun is wrong, that lying is normally wrong etc. It should also be said that one of the main motivations for moral scepticism may just be the thought that knowledge claims require good epistemic justifications to be provided by the agents making such claims in order to really count as expressions of knowledge, but this is precisely what the externalist is denying.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Hilary Kornblith has emphasised that, from the externalist perspective, knowledge is simply *not* conditional on justifications being able to be provided in his 'Does Reliabilism Make Knowledge Merely Conditional?', *Philosophical Issues*, 14 (2004), pp. 185–200.

If asked whether they would be more inclined to doubt that a chicken-sexer has any knowledge at all about the sex of his or her chicks or to doubt that ordinary run-of-the-mill people have any knowledge at all about morality, I would suggest that ordinary run-of-the-mill people would be much more inclined to doubt the former than the latter. Most of us would also need *very* strong arguments for moral scepticism to be presented to us in order to feel justified in suspending our first-order moral beliefs (this is arguably something one should attempt to do if one seriously, rationally doubted that they constitute knowledge).

Secondly, and more potentially damaging to my mind, a critic might contend that internalist *intuitionism* provides an account of justification that is available in the moral case, but not in the chicken-sexing case. The internalist intuitionist holds that there are some propositions that are self-evidently true, where that means that being in a position to believe the proposition on the basis of understanding it is enough to justify one in believing the proposition in a way that constitutes knowledge. Now, clearly no one is going to claim that *merely understanding* a contingently true proposition such as 'I am holding a female chick' could be the basis for knowledge, but many philosophers are attracted to the view that understanding a true proposition with moral content, such as 'Torturing someone merely for fun is wrong', might be enough of a basis for knowledge, at least in some core cases.

### Intuitionism and epistemic externalism

Intuitionism is only a threat to epistemic externalism, and the argument of the previous section, if it is taken to be an internalist position. Strictly speaking, intuitionists need not be internalists, but they generally are.<sup>9</sup> I will begin this section by describing the internalist intuitionist position, then I will argue that the position is problematic when it comes to moral knowledge, and that one of the main reasons (perhaps *the* main reason) that people are drawn to intuitionism is actually catered for very well by epistemic exter-

<sup>9</sup> Robert Audi is careful to point out that intuitionists need not be internalists in *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 57–59. Nonetheless, he admits that intuitionism most easily fits together with a rationalist picture that is internalist (*The Good in the Right*, p. 60), and he generally endorses internalism.

nalism. Recognizing the force of this point should actually draw people away from intuitionism (given its weaknesses), to instead favour epistemic externalism.

Take a candidate proposition P which we will assume has been entertained by me on some occasion (hence is understandable to me), is true and has substantive first-order moral content. Now, intuitionists would *not* want to claim that, as a matter of fact, given only what has just been specified, I know P. They would not want to claim this partly just because it would make knowledge too easy to come by,<sup>10</sup> and partly because serious philosophers disagree about the propositions they take to be self-evident, yet are not at liberty to accuse each other of misunderstanding the propositions in question. Philip Stratton-Lake, defending intuitionism, writes: 'For a proposition to be self-evident is for it to be *knowable* on the basis of an understanding of it. It does not follow from this that if P is self-evident and one understands P, then one will believe [know] that P. All it means is that one's understanding of P provides a sufficient warrant for believing [knowing] that P, not that one must recognize one's understanding as a sufficient warrant.'<sup>11</sup>

This is certainly fair enough, but now the question arises: 'What makes a difference in the case where I do know P?' It can't be just that I believe that P, because I could believe P for very bad reasons. It is tempting to suppose that what makes a difference is that a person who knows P does so on the basis of realising that P is self-evidently true. However, we would be wrong to suppose this, because we are told that knowing a self-evident proposition is not the same as knowing *that* it is self-evident. The latter, but not the former, requires considerable conceptual sophistication, and contemporary intuitionists, such as Stratton-Lake and Robert Audi, rightly claim that it would be overly-intellectualistic to suppose that ordinary people do not count as knowing P just because they lack the concept of 'self-evidence'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> To bring this out, imagine that I am a committed Kantian who is familiar with a utilitarian principle, which, as it happens, is self-evidently true (and which is strictly incompatible with my version of Kantianism). It is implausible to suppose that I actually know the utilitarian principle simply because I understand it and have entertained it.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Stratton-Lake, 'Introduction', in Philip Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–28 (quotation from pp. 20–21).

<sup>12</sup> See Stratton-Lake, 'Introduction', p. 20, and Robert Audi, 'Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics', in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (eds.),

The conclusion this brings us to is that being able to have a mental act of consciously *grasping* a true self-evident proposition is something that must be necessary if one is going to be in a position to count as directly knowing a self-evident proposition, on an internalist intuitionist account of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> It is not enough that I understand the proposition; I must also be capable of grasping it or committing myself to it at the same time – I must be able to believe it *on the basis of* understanding it (not on some other basis), and be able to do so in full awareness.<sup>14</sup>

We should think carefully about whether the internalist intuitionist picture really provides us with a plausible account of how ordinary agents might be thought to come by their basic moral knowledge. Recall the point I made much of in the last section, that many such agents believe very strange things about how they know what they take themselves to know, and have a wide range of incompatible stories that they are each deeply committed to about the basis of their knowledge. If they find themselves wondering whether torturing the innocent for fun is wrong, they might reflect on what their religious leaders (who we can specify are not reliable moral authorities) say, then think that they are accepting it on the basis of it being wrong according to such leaders.

The internalist intuitionist can respond to this fact in one of three ways. Firstly, she might claim that all such agents are lacking in moral knowledge. I think this is a very bitter pill to swallow. Since most ordinary agents in the world (many of whom behave very well to other people, as if they were somewhat virtuous, one might be forgiven for thinking) accept strange and incompatible stories about their evidence in relation to moral propositions, we must, on this view, conclude that most agents speak falsely when they claim that they know that lying is normally wrong. And it seems we must perforce commit ourselves to an intellectualistic elitism that would claim that only highly sophisticated thinkers

*Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 101–136 (especially pp. 106–107).

<sup>13</sup> I am assuming here that one is not in a position to offer up some other legitimate justification, such as good testimony. This is an appropriate assumption at this point (despite the comment in footnote 16, and the discussion of testimony below), since intuitionism is only an interesting thesis if there can be some such cases.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, the *externalist* intuitionist will need to provide a different explanation of what more needs to be added to merely understanding a true, self-evident proposition, in order to count as knowing it.

count as knowing moral propositions (of even the most basic, non-analytically true, kind). I hope the reader will agree this is not really an attractive option.

I think what might make this option appear acceptable to some philosophers is the emphasis on sceptical worries about moral knowledge in contemporary philosophy. Such attention to scepticism certainly has an important role to play in philosophy, but other forms of scepticism (e.g. scepticism about the external world, or other minds) play a similar role in philosophy, since they present genuine intellectual challenges that we might think must be met in some context, yet they are rarely endorsed wholeheartedly by philosophers, or, more to the point, thought to be problems specifically for ordinary folk that might only be overcome by the more intellectually sophisticated. To be fair, the prevalence of disagreements in the moral domain might be thought to provide a motivation to accept moral scepticism that has no parallel with respect to other forms of scepticism, but I think such disagreements are exaggerated (especially with respect to a core set of propositions at the most basic level of moral knowledge), and can be expected to decrease as moral progress occurs.

The second option available to the internalist intuitionist is to claim that ordinary agents can best be described in the following way: such agents actually accept the basic moral propositions they know by consciously grasping them on the basis of understanding them but they also consciously accept them on other bad epistemic grounds. The fact that people would generally not claim to be accepting moral propositions on the basis of understanding them demonstrates not that they are lacking in knowledge, but merely that they are self-deceived, or lacking in self-knowledge about their own conscious processes. I take it that this option is not quite as odious as the previous one, but it still seems highly problematic. It imputes a kind of ignorance or irrationality to ordinary agents that would be both widespread and surprising. The novelty of the idea that this is what a great number of people have been doing all the time should give us pause for thought. It seems very strange that no one has previously noticed that they are constantly flicking between self-consciously grasping propositions merely on the basis of understanding them, and attempting to accept them on other grounds.

The third and last option available to the internalist intuitionist is one where she simply reminds us that internalism does not

require that people *actually* believe on the basis of understanding a proposition (and do so through a conscious grasping of this basis), but only that they are *capable* of so doing. This is undoubtedly the most promising option for the internalist intuitionist to pursue, but I am not convinced that moving to a mere capability will ultimately be all that helpful here. I suspect that an appeal to one's understanding of a proposition as the main basis for believing it is something that would be quite alien to many people; it is not an appeal that they would be capable of making in a sincere fashion. The religious folk I have used as an example might claim to know what they know through testimony, and would be very likely to think of mere understanding as the wrong kind of thing to provide a justification. At this point, the intuitionist might point out that she is of course prepared to recognize that testimony can be an adequate basis for knowledge. However, from the intuitionist perspective, any legitimate chain of testimony must end with someone who is able to believe merely on the basis of understanding, and it is because it does so that other people can possess moral knowledge. This supports a kind of epistemic elitism in the moral sphere that the externalist need have no truck with. The externalist can view common religious folk as being like chicken-sexers who can only offer up bad justifications but do not lack knowledge as a result. Even if epistemic elitism in the moral domain is not a bad thing, we can still focus on examples where there clearly are no chains of testimony back to people who would be fundamental epistemic authorities from the internalist intuitionist perspective (plausibly, many religious leaders would fail this test).

I think I have provided enough of a case against internalist intuitionism, but these arguments may not convince an adherent of the position to drop a commitment to it.<sup>15</sup> The intuitionist might claim that there is something particularly appealing about the position that I have not yet considered. One of the main motivations for intuitionism is commonly taken to be the fact that it is a realist option that avoids the unattractive alternatives of

<sup>15</sup> For a sophisticated, independent argument against the other, related kind of epistemic internalism that is required for intuitionism to be viable (i.e. the kind of internalism I described at the end of footnote 5 above), see Timothy Williamson, 'On Being Justified in One's Head', in Mark Timmons, John Greco, and Alfred R. Mele (eds.), *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 106–122.

coherentism (why should mere coherence ensure that one has true, justified beliefs?) and the denial of the possibility of moral knowledge altogether on the grounds that there is no foundation to our moral beliefs (the only remaining alternative might be thought to be an infinite regress). Intuitionists avoid these traps by appealing to the notion of *self-evidence*. Some beliefs are justified because of their content alone, rather than because they can be inferred from other beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Patterns of inference must stop somewhere, and self-evidence is seen to be the way to ensure that they do, without this showing that the relevant beliefs are groundless.

I agree with intuitionists that there must be beliefs that can constitute knowledge in the absence of the agent being able to infer them from any other beliefs. Epistemic externalists have a highly plausible alternative explanation of why this is so: one simply does not need to be able to be aware of one's evidence to count as knowing something, so one can know some propositions without being able to make any inferences concerning the grounds of the propositions. Suppose we define *non-inferential justification* as justification that is not dependent on any actual or possible psychological inference (possible for the agent, given her beliefs at a particular time, that is). Intuitionists and externalists can then agree (and internalist coherentists disagree) that good, non-inferential justification is not only possible, but also often present in the real world. The externalist is in a position to add that such justification can consist in things that have nothing to do with the grasping of one's understanding of a proposition (they may instead point to the safety of the beliefs concerned, or a reliable belief-forming process), or with self-evidence in any robust sense – as distinct from a weak sense of 'self-evidence' that merely involves legitimately taking myself to have sufficient evidence, even though I am not aware of any evidence beyond the proposition being considered. The latter kind of self-evidence is all we really need to accept. This means that one of the main motivations for intuitionism counts in favour of epistemic externalism as much as it counts in favour of intuitionism.

<sup>16</sup> Although intuitionists are right to point out that being non-inferentially justified is compatible with the availability of additional sources of inferential justification.

## Conclusion

I have identified a way in which mainstream epistemologists might benefit from paying more attention to the moral domain, as well as a way in which moral philosophers might benefit from paying more attention to developments in mainstream epistemology. Morality provides a sphere of examples that are *prima facie* good candidates for knowledge, *despite* widespread disagreement amongst the people who might plausibly be taken to know the relevant propositions as to the evidential basis for their acceptance of them. Epistemologists may find that such examples are more helpful when discussing and assessing epistemic externalism than some others, such as the chicken-sexing case, that they presently focus on to a far greater extent.

Epistemic externalism provides a way for those of us who do not accept intuitionism to still accept a legitimate role for a weak notion of the self-evident (when considering propositions that do not appear to be believed on the basis of either perception or inference). Moral philosophers that have felt themselves drawn to intuitionism may find that it pays to reconsider their reasons for finding intuitionism attractive, since their main motivation for adopting the position may be better catered for by a very different position that many general epistemologists may well be right to think has a great deal going for it.<sup>17</sup>

*Department of Philosophy  
Boston University  
745 Commonwealth Avenue  
Boston MA 02215  
dnlstr@gmail.com*

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Practical Ethics at the Australian National University for support provided to me during the writing of this paper.