RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is Moral Knowledge Necessary for Moral Worth?

Yuanfan Huang*

Abstract: The article examines the necessity of moral knowledge for moral worth, focusing on Neil Sinhababu's (2024) arguments. Sliwa (2015) and Cunningham (2021) contend that moral worth requires moral knowledge. In contrast, Sinhababu (2024) challenges this view using Gettier cases, arguing that justified true belief, even without knowledge, can still confer moral worth. This article argues that Sinhababu's Gettier cases do not convincingly demonstrate that moral knowledge is unnecessary for moral worth.

Keywords: Moral knowledge; moral testimony; Gettier case; moral worth.

Regarding the question of whether moral knowledge is a necessary condition for moral worth, Sliwa (2015) and Cunningham (2021) contend that morally worthy actions inherently require moral knowledge. Sliwa posits that a morally right action possesses moral worth only if it is motivated by both a concern for doing what is right and knowledge that it is the right thing to do. Cunningham further argues that morally worthy actions must be motivated by an awareness of how to respond to the reasons that justify the action, which is informed by propositional knowledge of the specific

* Shanghai Jiao Tong University

   🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9144-2063

   ✎ School of Humanities, Department of Philosophy, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 800 Dongchuan RD. Minhang District, Shanghai, China

   ✉ huangyuanfan@sjtu.edu.cn

normative reason at hand. In contrast, recently, Neil Sinhababu (2024) suggests that Gettier cases—scenarios in which justified true belief fails to qualify as knowledge—indicate that moral knowledge is not necessary for moral worth.

In the following discussion, I will demonstrate that Sinhababu's Gettier case do not convincingly serve as counterexample to the claim that moral knowledge is necessary for moral worth.

Sinhababu introduces a Gettier case called "Texting the Rabbi" to question whether moral knowledge is necessary for moral worth. In this scenario, Ava and Beth face a moral dilemma involving William, who angrily demands the return of weapons he loaned to them. Both women seek guidance from their rabbi through text messages. Ava receives an authentic response from the rabbi, advising her not to return the weapon, which gives her a true belief grounded in moral knowledge. In contrast, Beth's message is intercepted by a thief, who provides her with a random reply by flipping a coin, leading her to believe that it is right not to return the weapon. Although Beth holds a justified true belief, she does not possess moral knowledge.

Sinhababu argues that Ava's and Beth's actions of not returning the weapon have equal moral worth despite one has moral knowledge while the other lacks. Both faced the same situation, sought advice, and acted on it in the same way. The difference in their knowledge—Ava's belief is based on genuine moral testimony, while Beth's is based on a random response—does not affect the moral worth of their actions. Beth's justified true belief, though not knowledge, still leads to a morally right action. Sinhababu concludes that moral worth does not require moral knowledge. The Gettier case that matter for knowledge are not the same as those that matter for moral worth. Actions motivated by justified true belief, even in Gettier cases, can have moral worth. In other words, one can acquire justified true belief regarding moral issues by luck and still possess moral worth.

Let us delve deeper into Sinhababu's cases by providing more details. In the first scenario, we assume that both Ava and Beth accept the Rabbi's words without further reflection or inquiry. If this is the case, they will embrace his guidance unconditionally, fully deferring their moral dilemmas to him. First, it is crucial to recognize that true moral saints are exceedingly

rare in reality. Even those who are generally virtuous can make misguided moral choices. There exists a genuine possibility that the Rabbi may act unethically at times or arrive at flawed conclusions concerning the moral challenges faced by Ava and Beth.[1] By choosing to relinquish their significant moral decisions to someone who is likewise fallible, they risk merely relying on luck should the Rabbi happen to provide sound advice.

One might argue that it is logically possible for the Rabbi to consistently make correct moral judgments and offer sound moral guidance to those who seek it. However, when individuals appeal to God or an external "foundational truth," they are, in Sartre's view, evading the responsibility of creating their own meaning in life. By deferring to a higher authority, they avoid acknowledging that they alone are responsible for their actions. Ava and Beth's reliance on the Rabbi mirrors this, as they forfeit their moral autonomy by accepting his guidance without reflection. In doing so, they shift their moral responsibility onto others, thereby diminishing their own moral worth. We can imagine a similar scenario in the future with an all-knowing moral AI capable of solving complex ethical dilemmas. If Ava and Beth were to always follow the AI's suggestions when uncertain about moral decisions, we would intuitively question their moral integrity in this case as well.[2]

Now, let's examine the second scenario, which is more plausible in everyday life. It is more likely that Ava and Beth would not simply accept the Rabbi's "yes or no" advice without further inquiry; instead, they would seek to understand the reasons behind it. When Beth receives a message from

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[1]   It is entirely possible for even a moral saint to make poor decisions. Firstly, proponents of situationism challenge the idea of global character traits—qualities that consistently manifest across different situations. For instance, a person may display courage on the battlefield but fail to show the same bravery in a courtroom. Secondly, many complex moral dilemmas may not have straightforward solutions. Consider the case of an individual who is uncertain about whether to use AI to assist with an assignment. If he opts to seek guidance from the Rabbi, there is no guarantee that the Rabbi will be able to address this issue effectively, especially if he is unfamiliar with how large language model (LLM) AI operates.

[2]   Compared to non-moral testimony, suppose Jake receives testimony about scientific knowledge p from Joe, a scientist who discovered the fact p. It is clear that the credit should be given to Joe. Similarly, it seems that the moral worth should be attributed to the individual who makes the moral decision.

the fake Rabbi stating, "You should not return the weapon," it would be unusual for the conversation to end there. Typically, a genuine Rabbi would provide justifications for such guidance. Therefore, in a typical situation, if the fake Rabbi fails to offer further explanation, Beth would likely ask for additional clarification. With these characterizations, there are two possibilities. In the first scenario, if the fake Rabbi is merely making decisions by flipping a coin, Beth will eventually realize that her message has been intercepted. In that case, she would stop trusting the fake Rabbi's moral testimony. In the second scenario, if the fake Rabbi wants to continue the interaction and is skilled at giving moral advice—perhaps through extensive reading of moral philosophy—Beth may not realize that the Rabbi is fake. In this situation, the fake Rabbi could be considered as knowledgeable as the real Rabbi when it comes to moral knowing-that; since if he weren't, he would be easily exposed as an imposter.[3] However, even though the fake Rabbi lacks virtuous character, his possession of extensive moral propositional knowledge might lead one to question why Beth's trust in his moral advice wouldn't be justified, given the knowledge he holds.

So far, I have argued that in one scenario, if Ava and Beth accept pure moral testimony without further reflection, neither of them can justifiably be attributed with moral worth. In another scenario, if Ava and Beth require an understanding of the reasons behind the moral testimony, it is likely that Beth would recognize the message as coming from a fake Rabbi, since a fake Rabbi is typically not competent to provide sound moral guidance. However, we must also consider the logical possibility that the fake Rabbi possesses knowledge equivalent to that of a genuine Rabbi in terms of propositional moral knowledge; in such a case, his moral testimony could be considered warranted. Given these considerations, three possibilities arise: either Beth does not deserve moral worth, or she would reject the fake Rabbi's testimony, or she is justified in believing the fake Rabbi's claims. In any of these scenarios, Beth's situation cannot support the claim that the Gettier case entails that moral knowledge is unnecessary for moral worth.

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[3] Clearly, the fake Rabbi only possesses "knowing-that" regarding moral issues; therefore, it is possible that he might fail to act according to this knowledge, which requires "knowing-how."

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