

Two types of moral cognitivism

MORAL COGNITIVISM

Cognitivism is the view that we can have moral knowledge. The cognitivist believes that statements like ‘Euthanasia is not wrong’ are expressions of beliefs, which can be true or false. ‘Non-cognitivists’ argue that there is no moral knowledge, because there is no objective moral truth. One form of cognitivism, moral realism, claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgments are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person, or situation actually has.

Cognitivists argue that our experience of morality suggests that there are moral truths. First, we think we can make mistakes. Children frequently do, and have to be taught what is right and wrong. If there were no facts about moral right and wrong, it wouldn’t be possible to make mistakes. Second, morality feels like a demand from ‘outside’ us. We feel answerable to a standard of behaviour which is independent of what we want or feel. Morality isn’t determined by what we think about it. Third, many people believe in moral progress. But how is this possible, unless some views about morality are better than others? And how is that possible unless there are facts about morality?

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they? Moral truths seem to be quite different from empirical truths, which we can discover using our senses. In this handout, we consider two answers. (A third is discussed in ‘Moral truth as based on relational properties’.)

MORAL TRUTH AS TRANSCENDENT

The idea that moral truth is ‘transcendent’ is the idea that it must be quite distinct and different from the empirical world, and in some way, it is superior to it. Many philosophers have noticed that we commonly experience a conflict between what we believe is morally right and what we want to do or how we feel. In this conflict, morality is ‘higher’, what is ‘better’ in us, and it claims to have ‘authority’ over us, while immoral desires and emotions are a ‘lower’ and ‘animal’ part of our nature. To become morally good, we have to temper or overcome selfish desires and immediate emotional reactions and learn to consider others. Because we don’t see morality in the rest of nature, among other animals, the ‘higher’ part of ourselves, we can argue, must have a different origin, outside the empirical world. Moral values, on this view, are not part of the natural world, but exist beyond it (e.g. science can’t investigate values).

The most common way of understanding this is through the belief in God. Values are part of the ‘supernatural’ world, and this is also the origin of the ‘higher’ part of ourselves (our souls, perhaps). However, this interpretation of transcendence isn’t the only one,

and we won't discuss it further, as the syllabus is interested only in God-independent theories of moral transcendence.

The analogy with mathematical truths

The idea of transcendence is puzzling. We (think we) know what it is for physical things to exist, and there is nothing strange about how we discover them through our senses. But what can it be for something to exist that is not part of the empirical world? An analogy with mathematics can help.

Intuitively, mathematical truths are about numbers and other mathematical objects (such as geometrical shapes): ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is about the numbers '2' and '4'. But what are numbers? No physical object is a number. Or again, what are triangles? No physical triangle is a 'perfect' triangle, and mathematicians don't study triangles physically, e.g. the proof that the three internal angles of a triangle add up to 180° doesn't rely on measuring lots of different triangles to check. One view is that mathematical objects are 'abstract objects'. They exist, in a sense, not as physical things, but abstract things. They don't exist in space and time, but nor are they psychological things, e.g. they aren't concepts, but what concepts refer to. $2 + 2 = 4$ was true even before we came up with the concepts of '2' and '4'. We make mathematical discoveries – these are discoveries about numbers. Mathematical truths don't depend on what we think; they are objective and independent of us.

How do we discover the truth about numbers and other mathematical objects? Many mathematicians believe that we have a form of mathematical 'intuition', which is a form of pure thought, a part of our capacity of reason. Although it is not based on the sense, it is a form of thought that we tend to describe by analogy with perception – as when you 'see' the proof, you 'grasp' the nature of the triangle, and so on. Like other forms of thought, it is not infallible, and it can be trained.

We can apply this model of knowledge to moral truth. Values are transcendent, outside space and time. They are objective, existing independently of us. We come to know about them using a form of rational intuition, which some philosophers identify as 'conscience', which is fallible but can be trained to become more accurate.

Platonic Forms

Plato's theory of the Forms provides one example of this understanding of values as transcendent. There are Forms that relate to moral values – Forms of justice, courage, kindness, and so on. Like all Forms, they exist outside space and time, independently of us, and never change. They are universal values, types of perfection, and empirical things – such as human motives and actions – exhibit moral values by partaking in the Forms; so the Forms are the origin of everything moral in us.

In being perfect, Plato argues, the Forms partake of the 'supreme' Form, the Form of the Good. Why are all values values? What is valuable about them? What they all have in common, we might say, is 'Value' itself, or the 'Good'. Knowing what is good is the highest kind of knowledge.

MORAL TRUTH AS BASED ON NATURAL FACTS

Opposing the view that moral truth is transcendent is the view that moral truths are closely tied to natural facts, especially psychological facts. Cognitivism in the last 150

years has focused on trying to clarify the nature of this relation. As we will see, there are several theories of how to understand it.

Mill: Desirable and desired

One version of the claim is that moral truths just are natural facts. Some philosophers have interpreted John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism in this way. Mill claims that an action is right if it creates greater (or equal) happiness than any other action in that situation. So 'right' = 'greatest happiness', and 'good' = 'happiness'. Happiness is natural property, and therefore, so is goodness. (Whether Mill claims this, or that goodness is distinct from but grounded on happiness, is contentious.)

To say happiness is good is to say that it should be our 'end' – what we aim at in action. Mill claims that happiness is our only end, the only good – so it could be the same thing as goodness. He admits that no proof is possible, but we can make an argument based on evidence. He says that 'questions about ends are...questions about what things are desirable'. (*Utilitarianism*, Ch. 4) And our evidence about what is desirable must come from what we desire. Mill argues that we all want happiness (and only happiness). From this, he concludes, happiness is good (and the only good).

However, the word 'desirable' has two meanings. Its usual meaning is 'worthy of being desired'. Anything desirable in this sense is good. But another meaning could be 'capable of being desired'. To discover what is capable of being desired, look at what people desire. But from what people actually want, how can we tell what is worthy of being desired (good)? People want all sorts of rubbish!

Many philosophers object that Mill has simply failed to spot the gap between the two meanings of 'desirable'. But this is unlikely. Instead, Mill is asking 'What evidence is there for thinking that something is worthy of being desired?'. He argues that people in general desire happiness. Unless we think that people in general all desire what is not worth desiring, this looks like good evidence. Is there anything that everyone wants that is not worth wanting? If we look at what people agree upon in what they desire, we will find what is worth desiring. Everyone wants happiness, so happiness is good.

Virtues and human flourishing

Aristotle argued that moral philosophy is interested in the 'good life' for human beings as the particular sorts of being we are. 'Living well' is the ultimate aim of all human action. To 'live well' is determined by human nature. His term for 'living well' – eudaimonia – has been translated as 'happiness'. But the idea is more like 'flourishing'. We have an idea of what it is for a plant or animal to 'flourish'; we can provide an analysis of its needs and when those needs are met in abundance. Human living involves choosing and acting, but also involves the nature and quality of one's relationships with others and the state of one's mind. The facts about human nature, in particular psychological facts about our universal desires, our needs, and our ability to reason, are the basis for moral truths, e.g. whether a character trait, such as courage or being short-tempered, is good (a virtue) or bad (a vice).

Moore: The open question argument and the naturalistic fallacy

In *Principia Ethica*, G E Moore objected to Mill's argument above. Moore did not argue that there is no relation between moral properties and natural properties. He thought there was; he argued that in two situations, identical natural properties would secure

identical moral properties. So moral properties are, in some way, based on natural properties. But they are not identical.

Moore called the attempt to equate goodness to any natural property the naturalistic fallacy. Goodness, he claimed, is a simple and unanalysable property. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else. Colours are similar. Blue is a simple property, and no one can explain what blue is, you have to see it for yourself to understand what blue is. But unlike colours, goodness is a non-natural property. It is not part of the natural world, the world of science; but it is part of reality.

Moore's main argument for believing that it is a fallacy – a mistake – to identify goodness with a natural property is the 'open question' argument. If goodness just is happiness, then it wouldn't make sense to ask 'Is it good to make people happy?'. This would be like asking 'Does what makes people happy make people happy?'. This second question isn't a real question (the answer has to be 'yes'), but 'Is it good to make people happy?' is a real question – the answer can logically be 'yes' or 'no'. And so goodness cannot be happiness, or any other property. 'Is x good?' is always a real question while 'Is x x?' is not. And so goodness cannot be any other property.

Is the 'naturalistic fallacy' a real fallacy?

This argument doesn't work. Here is a similar argument. 'The property of being water cannot be any property in the world, such as the property of being H₂O. If it was then the question "Is water H₂O?" would not make sense – it would be like asking "Is H₂O H₂O?". So water is a simple, unanalysable property.' This is not right, as water just is H₂O.

The reason the argument doesn't work is because it confuses concepts and properties. Two different concepts – 'water' and 'H₂O' – can pick out the same property in the world. You knew about water before you knew it was H₂O – during this time, you had the concept 'water', but not the concept 'H₂O'. So they are different concepts, but they both refer to the same thing. Likewise, the concept 'goodness' is a different concept from 'happiness', but perhaps they are exactly the same property in the world. We may doubt this for other reasons, but the point is that the open question argument does not show that they are different.

The 'is-ought' gap

Even if the open question argument is too simple, we may think that Moore is right to think that, from any natural property, we cannot deduce a moral property. Whatever facts you get together to support your moral judgment (the action will cause happiness), you cannot logically infer the judgment (it is morally right). Hume noted the gap between describing the facts and saying something ought to be done: 'this ought...expresses some new relation [of which it] seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it'. (*Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, §1)

This argument has often been used to support the view that there is no moral truth. The gap occurs because morality is not a matter of fact, but a matter of attitudes that we take to the facts.