

Moral truth: knowledge, agreement and motivation

This handout follows handouts on ‘Two types of moral cognitivism’ and ‘Moral truth as based on relational properties’. You should read those handouts first.

HOW IS KNOWLEDGE OF MORAL TRUTH POSSIBLE?

Models of knowledge

The handouts ‘Two types of moral cognitivism’ and ‘Moral truth as based on relational properties’ discuss different models of moral truth. Each model has a corresponding account of what moral knowledge is.

1. For Plato, moral knowledge is knowledge of the Forms;
2. for Aristotle, it is knowledge of human flourishing and how to live well;
3. on the reductionist interpretation of Mill, it is
 - a. the knowledge that what is good is happiness; and then
 - b. the knowledge of what actions bring about the greatest happiness;
4. for Moore, it is knowledge of the non-natural property of goodness; and
5. on the reasons-based theory, it is knowing what we have most (moral) reason to do.

Because what moral knowledge is differs on each account, there are different answers to the question of how moral knowledge is possible.

The theory that goodness is a natural property can provide the most straightforward answer – we know about natural properties empirically. Once we have established which natural properties are relevant (e.g. happiness), there is no special problem about how moral knowledge is possible. However, establishing the connection between moral properties and the relevant natural facts is very contentious, and not a matter of empirical argument, but philosophical reasoning. Can Mill establish that happiness is the only good thing? Can Aristotle show what counts as a ‘good life’ for human beings? There have been many different ways in which people have ‘flourished’ in different cultures. So from the biological and psychological facts alone, we cannot deduce any moral knowledge. If there is one ‘best’ way to live, we need some other way of discovering it.

Moral reasoning and insight

In fact, all the forms of cognitivism we have discussed argue that moral knowledge is gained through reasoning, and involves a type of rational insight. In this way, moral knowledge is different from empirical knowledge. We gain empirical knowledge through causation – the thing we learn about causes us to have certain sense experiences of it (e.g. a rose reflects light that enters our eyes). But moral properties do not cause our moral judgments. (What could the causal mechanism be?) This is one important disanalogy with secondary qualities.

Numbers and other mathematical objects similarly do not cause our mathematical judgments. We gain mathematical knowledge through (mathematical) reasoning and insight. Most cognitivists, however, think that moral reasoning and insight is not purely intellectual in the way maths is. Both Plato and Aristotle argue that it involves training one's desires and emotions first, because if we don't develop virtues, we won't be able to see the truth; Aristotle adds that it cannot be taught, but requires experience of life.

But what is this 'reasoning and insight'? Does it really exist? Contemporary philosophers offer two types of model.

Self-evidence

A self-evident judgement rests on the 'evidence' of its own plausibility, which is grasped directly. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. 'Self-evident' is not the same as 'obvious'. Our ability to make these judgements needs to develop first, and we need to consider the issue very carefully.

The difficulty with 'self-evident' judgements is that people disagree about whether they are true or not. Moore thought it was self-evident that pleasure is good and that maximizing the good is right. But other philosophers have thought it was self-evident that there are times when it is wrong to maximize pleasure. The problem is, because the judgements are supposed to be self-evident, any further reasons for believing them will not be as conclusive as considering the claim itself.

Can we do without the idea of self-evidence? Suppose we could give reasons for thinking that pleasure is good, e.g. because it forms part of a flourishing life for human beings. Is it, then, self-evident that being part of a flourishing life makes something good? If you give a reason, we can ask whether this reason is self-evidence, and so on.

Reflective equilibrium

Another model of reasoning claims that no judgment is self-evident, because it rests on support by other beliefs. When we then question those beliefs, we can give reasons for believing them, but must in turn assume others. Our reasoning, then, involves a matter of interpreting, applying and adjusting a framework of reasons. We test our claims and the reasons we give by their place in the framework.

In our reflections on reasons, we will be guided by trying to make sense of our moral attitudes generally. Reflection itself will be guided by further intuitions – we will reject what seems implausible to us. We appeal to the overall coherence, the balance between our intuitions and our process of reflection, the 'reflective equilibrium' we reach. There is a lot of agreement on when something counts as a reason, even if we disagree on how strong a reason it is. And when there is disagreement, this could be the result of different information or experience. It is very rare for two people to simply disagree over whether x is a reason, and have nothing else to say about x.

The non-cognitivist's challenge

Non-cognitivists will reply that our intuitions are not insights into moral truth at all. Instead, they reflect our pre-existing values and commitments.

We will see two arguments for this claim in the handouts on 'Emotivism' and 'Prescriptivism'. A third argument is developed by Nietzsche, who argues that our approach to moral philosophy, and philosophy in general, is all wrong. Following Plato,

we seek to give complete definitions of ideas, such as ‘what is goodness?’. But Nietzsche argues that ‘only that which has no history is definable’ in this way. (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, II §13) Our ideas have a history, so trying to give universal definitions of them is radically mistaken. In fact, the intuitions we use to defend this or that answer are themselves as historical, as contentious as the theories we give – so they offer no real support:

most of a philosopher’s conscious thinking is secretly guided and channelled into particular tracks by his instincts. Behind all logic, too, and its apparent tyranny of movement there are value judgements, or to speak more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a particular kind of life. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §3)

Nietzsche holds that different people are ‘instinctively’ drawn to different kinds of life. Our values are a reflection of the type of person we are. Everybody is drawn to the way of life that suits them best. Different values, and different interpretations of these values, support different ways of life, and so people are instinctively drawn to particular values and ways of understanding them.

THE POSSIBILITY OF AGREEMENT OVER MORAL TRUTH

When two people disagree over a matter of fact, whether it is about the natural world (dinosaurs) or the human world (love), we normally know how we could prove the matter one way or the other. But if two people agree over all the natural facts about abortion, say, but still disagree about whether it is right, we cannot appeal to any more ‘facts’ in the same way. What we would call ‘the facts’ seem to be all agreed, but the dispute about values remains. Value judgements always go beyond the facts. Hume argues the moral judgment doesn’t pick out a fact, it expresses a feeling, which is why you can’t reach moral agreement just by discussing the facts. We should doubt, then, that there is such a thing as moral truth.

The cognitivist can reply that this oversimplifies moral arguments. If two people agree on the natural facts, but still disagree morally, they must be disagreeing about reasons. For example, is the fact that the foetus will become a human being a (strong) reason for thinking abortion is wrong? If we resolved the disagreement about both natural facts and about what counts as a reason for what, people would agree on the moral judgement as well. When two people disagree morally, at least one of them is making a mistake, because they are not seeing certain natural facts as the reasons they are. If, as many cognitivists claim, we need both virtues and experience of life to gain sound moral insight, then it is not surprising that so many people make mistakes.

We can object, first, that it is not plausible that all cases of moral disagreement involve at least one person who lacks virtue and life experience! Second, if we press this line too much, then we return to Plato’s view that moral truth is very hard to come to know. And if only a few people can gain moral knowledge, then the possibility of agreement on moral truth is very small indeed. Third, there are many influences on people’s moral beliefs, not just reasoning and insight. For instance, try to imagine that everyone (in a city or country or the world) actually reached moral agreement. Realistically, why would that have happened? Is it plausible to think that it is because reason has – finally! – won people over? It is more likely that throughout history, moral beliefs have changed as a result of other forces.

This is to consider the question of agreement practically. The cognitivist, however, only needs to defend the view that agreement is theoretically possible; they can concede that human fallibility makes agreement near-impossible in practice.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH MORAL TRUTHS CAN MOTIVATE/JUSTIFY ACTION

Justifying action

Justifying and motivating action are not equivalent. To justify an action is to show why it is morally right or good. But the reasons that justify an action may not be the same reasons that actually motivate someone to do the action. For example, according to act utilitarianism, an action is right if it brings about the greatest happiness. Suppose that helping a friend is right for this reason. Nevertheless, you might be motivated to help your friend not because doing so will bring about the greatest happiness (this doesn't enter your thoughts), but simply because you love your friend.

If there are moral truths, then it is uncontentious that they justify actions. So we shall concentrate on the more difficult question of whether moral truths motivate action.

Motivating action

Moral judgements guide our behaviour. If I think pleasure is good, I aim to bring about pleasure. If I think abortion is wrong, I will not commit or encourage others to commit abortion. Moral motivation can seem puzzling if the moral cognitivist is correct. A truth, in and of itself, doesn't lead to action. For example, the fact that it is raining doesn't motivate me to pick up my umbrella unless I don't want to get wet. It seems that I need to care about the truth, and then the motivating force comes from the caring.

Hume argued that in order to act, we need beliefs, about how the world is and how to change it, and a desire, in order to be motivated to change it. But surely statements about right and wrong, good and bad are motivating in their own right. But in that case, they are not like beliefs (about truths), they are like desires.

Cognitivists have made two different responses to this objection. The first is to claim that moral judgments are not motivating. There certainly seem to be people – and perhaps all of us at certain times, e.g. when we are depressed – for whom statements about morality are not motivating. They just don't care about morality. Moral judgements, then, are only motivating to people who care about morality.

The second response is to agree that moral judgments are motivating, and this would be a puzzle if they were judgments about natural facts or Platonic Forms. But if we argue instead, that moral truths are based on relational properties, we can explain how they are motivating. If moral judgments are about what we have reason to do, they will be motivating, because judgments about reasons are judgments about reasons for us. As long as we are rational, reasons will motivate us directly. Of course, that motivation can be interfered with because we are not completely rational, so we will not always do what we have most reason to do.