

Moral knowledge, elitism, and weakness of will

All moral cognitivists claim that our beliefs about moral values can be true or false. For example, anyone who thinks violent rape is not wrong has a false belief, and anyone who thinks courage is good has a true belief. So in many moral disagreements, one or both sides are simply wrong, however sincere they are. For example, our desires and emotions can bias our thinking and so lead to mistakes.

However, the belief that there is moral truth doesn't mean that the truth is simple or easy. Some cognitivists argue that moral truths are very complicated, that they are sensitive to context and situation. And cognitivism doesn't claim that there is one clear answer to every moral problem.

'ELITISM'

Plato argued that gaining knowledge of the Good is very difficult indeed. It is the culmination of knowledge of the Forms, and this requires both a very special sort of person and years of training. Knowledge of the Forms requires a complete reorientation of the mind, he argues, away from our usual desires, for the pleasure of the body, for money, for fame. The person must love learning – philosophy – above everything else.

This is clearly 'elitism' – only people who have the special temperament and training really know the truth about morality. We can object that everyone has the capacity for moral knowledge, even if moral truth is transcendent, e.g. many religious people would argue that everyone has a conscience. But to defend universal knowledge of the good, we must either reject Plato's theory of the Forms or his theory of what is required for knowledge of the Forms.

But is moral 'elitism' obviously wrong? If there can be moral knowledge, then it is plausible that some people have it while other people lack it. This distinction applies to all other areas of knowledge – are we to object that physicists are 'elitist' in claiming that they know more about physics? Instead of objecting to 'elitism', we celebrate their 'expertise'. If there is moral knowledge, then it is possible that there are moral 'experts'. We might argue that historical religious figures are examples.

However, many cognitivists have held that anyone who is capable of being a moral agent (acting virtuously or viciously), if they do not know the moral truth, can at least use their reason to discover what the moral truth is, if they want to. This is not to say it is easy, but at least it is possible.

WEAKNESS OF WILL

Moral knowledge is knowledge of what is morally good. According to most cognitivists, what is morally good is also good 'all things considered'. In other words, it is always better to act in a way that is morally good. 'Weakness of will' occurs when someone who,

knowing that 'all things considered', it is best to do x, nevertheless does y. How can, and why would, someone act in a way that they themselves judge is not the best way to act?

Socrates argued that weakness of will was impossible: 'No one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course' (*Protagoras* 358b-c). He defended the view that moral knowledge is the same thing as virtue, so that if you know what the good thing to do is, you will do it. No one knowingly does what (they believe) is wrong.

Socrates' view is still defended by both cognitivists and non-cognitivists. For example, the non-cognitivist Hare argues that moral judgments guide our decisions and actions. To say 'I ought to do x' is like giving oneself a command. Since one believes the statement, one assents to the command – but to agree to follow a command is to obey it. So weakness of will is a puzzle for both cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

However, weakness of will does seem to occur. Most philosophers who deny its reality defend a version of the claim that the person doesn't really (deep down) believe that the right thing to do is x. For example, they actually believe that the pleasure of doing y, rather than x, outweighs what is good about x. Socrates argues that while they say doing x is right, they don't really understand that x is right, for instance, they wrongly assess the pleasure of doing y as better than x. To be virtuous, Socrates argues, is simply to (really) know the truth about what is good and what is not.

Aristotle thought weakness of will is possible. He argued that virtue is not simply knowledge; it is knowledge held in the right way, so that it has the right effect on one's motivation. Someone who is weak-willed is not without moral knowledge, but in the moment of being weak-willed, they do not fully grasp the significance of their knowledge.

More recently, Donald Davidson ('How is weakness of the will possible?') argued that the weak-willed person does not convert their judgment that x is best 'all things considered' into the judgment that x is best unconditionally or 'all-out'. We can understand how someone might say: 'I can see how all the reasons point to doing x, but I'm still not completely convinced'. Something, e.g. the pleasure that doing y offers, prevents them from making that final, unconditional judgment that x is best.

These solutions all argue that weakness of will involves a failure of the person to judge that x is (really) best. A different approach argues that judgment, or reason, simply does not have the final say on our decisions. Our emotions and desires, in an irrational way, can change what we do, so that we do genuinely and finally judge that x is best, but still do y. We are simply not fully rational creatures, but can be motivated to do we do not believe in any sense is best.