Moral knowledge

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 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.

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. Contemporary cognitivism typically focuses on the relation between natural facts and values/reasons.

MORAL TRUTH AS BASED ON NATURAL FACTS

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).

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.

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 H_2O. If it was then the question "Is water H_2O?" would not make sense – it would be like asking "Is H_2O H_2O?". So water is a simple, unanalysable property.' This is not right, as water just is H_2O.

The reason the argument doesn't work is because it confuses concepts and properties. Two different concepts – 'water' and 'H_2O' – can pick out the same property in the world. You knew about water before you knew it was H_2O – during this time, you had the concept 'water', but not the concept 'H_2O'. 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.

REASONS FOR ACTION
The is-ought gap makes it seem that appealing to the (natural) facts when we are trying to justify a moral judgement is silly. In fact, we think of the facts as reasons that support our moral claims, for example that eating meat is wrong, because of the suffering it causes to animals. Now the idea of a 'reason' only makes sense in relation to a rational creature – us. Reasons are always reasons for someone. Moral reasons are reasons for someone to do something. That some fact, e.g. the suffering of an animal, is a reason, e.g. for us not to eat meat, is a relational property – it is only true (if it is true) in relation to us.

Understanding moral properties as reasons for action can be used in argue for objective moral truth. On this view, whether some fact is a moral reason for or against some action is objectively true or false. Compare reasons for other types of belief. If radiometric decay indicates that the dinosaur bones are 65 million years old, this is a reason to believe that dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago. It is not proof, but it is a reason. (Reasons can come in different strengths – there can be good reasons, really good reasons, and proof. Bad reasons are not actually reasons at all.) The result of radiometric dating dinosaur bones is a reason to think dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago, whether you think it is a reason or not. Facts about reasons are objective.

Facts about reasons are not identical with natural facts. Natural facts are not (necessarily) relational, but whether a natural fact is a reason is relational. Furthermore, there is no scientific or empirical investigation into what reasons there are. Facts about reasons are normative facts. They are facts about justification and reasoning.

Moral reasons

We can now understand moral judgments like this: to say that something is wrong is to say that the moral reasons against doing it are stronger than any moral reason in favour of doing it. Because this is a statement of (normative) fact, then moral judgments can be true or false. Of course, it can be difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for action, and how strong this reason is. But the truth is often difficult to discover.

This theory explains the connection between natural properties and moral judgments and so bridges Hume's 'is-ought' objection. Hume is right that we cannot move directly from natural properties to moral judgments. Appealing to natural facts as reasons doesn't prove a moral judgment to be true or false. We cannot deduce moral judgments from considering the natural facts; instead, we must weigh up the reasons that the natural facts give us. But once we recognise that whether a natural fact counts as a reason for believing a certain value judgement is itself a matter of objective fact, we can cross the gap.

OBJECTIONS

But isn't the idea of 'truths about reasons' a very strange notion? But reasons aren't strange, and we need them even to do science. Aristotle claims that certain facts about being human means that a certain way of living is the best, most flourishing life. We therefore have reason to develop our characters in ways that allow us to live like this and meet ours and other people's needs. This isn't strange.

We can object that if reasons are related to us, dependent on us, then surely they must be subjective. Facts are part of the world. The fact the dinosaurs roamed the Earth millions of years ago would be true whether anyone had found out about it or not. But whether something is a reason or not depends on us.

This misunderstands the way in which reasons depend on us. There are lots of facts – for example, facts about being in love, or facts about music – that 'depend' on human beings and their activities (there would be no love if no one loved anything). But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgements, and made true by the way the

world, in this case the human world, is. You can make mistakes about whether someone is in love or whether a piece of music is baroque or classical.

But are reasons dependent on 'human beings' in general or on individuals? Take the case of animal suffering: surely this is only a reason for me not to eat meat if I care about animals. Or again, the fact that studying hard will increase my understanding of philosophy is only a reason to study hard if I want to understand philosophy. So what we (individually) have reason to do depends on what we (individually) want. So reasons aren't objective, they are subjective. Moral judgments are expressions of what we care about, they are not expressions of truth.

John McDowell argues that this misunderstands moral values. It is true that the idea that something is a moral value (e.g. honesty) only makes sense in relation to valuers. Moral judgments are defined in the context of human responses to the world. But what values there are doesn't depend on what any individual person finds valuable or not, just as what colour something is independent of any individual person's perception of it.

We can link moral values and reasons: a value gives us a reason to act in a particular way. So McDowell is arguing that whether some fact (e.g. animal suffering) is a reason to act in a certain way (e.g. stop eating meat) depends in general on human responses; but it is independent of any individual's response, so it is not subjective. The question is then, how do we discover what moral reasons there are?

HOW IS KNOWLEDGE OF MORAL TRUTH POSSIBLE?

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.