

HPPH7010

KNOWLEDGE, REASON AND REALITY, ASSIGNMENT 2

TIAGO FALEIRO, STUDENT NO: 2105378

ESSAY

Please scroll to
end of document
to see feedback +
mark

What are the chief problems that philosophers have confronted in providing a definition of *moral* knowledge that would stand firm against the threat of sceptical doubt? *

* As agreed with Professor Rebekah Humphreys via email, I narrowed the scope of the essay question to moral knowledge

Introduction

We have no difficulty in asserting the existence of moral knowledge of some sort, but we struggle defining its limits and giving it content. What's it knowledge of? Certain ways to think, act and feel unquestionably belong to a domain we would call "moral", while others not so: helping a friend in need versus a solitary walk in the woods, say. Most of the time we struggle to say where the difference between them lies, even if we can point to what we think are clear-cut cases of one and the other. So for now we can only claim its borders are porous. ✓

It also seems to be a form of operative knowledge, a "know how" to act, think and feel in appropriate contexts. A widely accepted conception of morality presents it as a set of injunctions to the self, prescribing ways in which the self should behave which are grounded in rationally compelling reasons. But this conception of morality as normative injunctions presupposes a capacity for the agent to control himself in a way which he may not be able, or willing, to do. Rational reasons for action are not always overriding. So there has to be more to the domain of morality than rationally following rules.

Some of the difficulties we face when attempting to provide a definition of moral knowledge may stem from a different source, namely the particular and contrasting ways in which the enquiry has been conducted throughout history. The subject matter itself changed, so that what we came to think today as "Morality", with its more narrowly defined domain, is substantially different from what was the scope of Ethics in Ancient and pre-Modern times

(Macintyre, 2016, ch. 1).

①
Tiago, in this essay you assume an expressivist version of morality; a version which is subjectivist in nature & a non-cognitivist stance, so moral knowledge probably won't stand firm against scepticism on this stance. You'd be better off assessing & trying to present counter-arguments against a cognitivist, realist position & seeing how far the arguments stand up against sceptical doubt.

Morality as a conception with a porous, "fuzzy" border; the seeming paradox of its nature as the technical mastery of an "un-technical" subject matter (ourselves); a complex, multi-stranded history of enquiry that stretches over millennia and whose topic itself changed in no small part as the result of such enquiries. These are only some of the issues plaguing the possibility of defining moral knowledge. My aim for this essay is to expand on two perspectives from which we can mount strong sceptical arguments that undermine one's confidence in being in the possession of such knowledge. In the first one I will explore the tensions between different accounts of what makes an action morally wrong; in the second one I will point out how certain ways of self-description limit the scope for moral self-knowledge.

Roles and guises

On June 6 1944, on the beaches of Normandy, the wartime photographer Robert Capa took what are the most famous and instantly recognisable pictures of the D-Day landings. They were taken under conditions of extreme duress - they are snapshots of soldiers disembarking under heavy fire, which the photographer was equally exposed to as well. Most pictures he took that morning were lost, as the photographer's equipment was damaged while he accompanied the soldiers storming the beaches. Additionally, further damage was done to the negatives of the pictures that he did manage to take - an issue with their processing caused them to burn out, so that only eleven pictures remained usable. Capa further mentions that the pressure of the horrors in the combat zone caused him to have a panic attack, leading him to escape to safety by boarding an Allied ship shortly after arriving there.

This is how the story was told by Capa; however, significant evidence has shown this narrative to be false in many regards (Coleman, 2019). The pictures are not from soldiers from the first wave of invasion, but of engineer crews tasked with clearing the path for tanks and other vehicles, after the fighting had mostly abated; Capa was, contrary to what he stated, in a quiet sector of Omaha beach, where the enemy fire was light; his description of his role in the events is contradicted by multiple witnesses; and the story of the burnt negatives was shown to be demonstrably false from multiple sources.

One wonders why Capa, already a celebrated wartime reporter then, would fabricate such a tale. The author of the article frames it as a one of two possibilities:

(2)

"We must consider the possibility that he suffered from what they then called "shell shock" and we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But we must also consider the possibility that, even before setting forth that morning, Capa made a calculated decision to leave the battlefield at the first opportunity, in order to get his films to London in time to make the deadline for LIFE's next issue; if he missed that deadline, any images of the landing would become old news and his effort and risks in making them would have been for naught. (Coleman, 2019)"

Robert Capa, when concocting his story, perhaps thought that claiming to have had a panic attack would be perceived by others as a plausible excuse for his early departure from the front. Of course this excuse is only rendered plausible if the appropriate context is also present, namely that he was in the thick of the fighting, hence the need to alter other elements in his narrative. Here's the veteran wartime reporter, well accustomed in his role as a neutral eyewitness of events, no matter how dire ("here's how it happened, as it happened"), who was nonetheless shook to the core by the carnage happening all around him - the dramatic resonance of the events was such that his disengaged stance as a reporter simply gave way and he lost the ability to cope.

So he was an overly dramatic reporter, playing to his audience. Nothing new, or particularly interesting there, one could say. Maybe so. That there is a *moral* failing on his part seems apparent to us: both in the deliberate misrepresentation of his role in the events, and in the self-serving nature of that same misrepresentation. The key word here is "misrepresentation". Why is it a failure, a moral failure in this case? Because there is a clear intent to deceive, we would say. We feel cheated, as the events have been misconstrued in a conscious effort to heighten their emotional effect on us, its recipients. Instinctively, we blame Capa for spinning a bogus narrative out of an "un-staged" reality ready to be grasped by the journalist who was courageous (or foolhardy) enough to disembark with the first wave of troops.

That reality is just "sitting there" waiting to be documented is an assumption we are perhaps too quick to make; another one is that the reporter's role is to document said reality from a "neutral" stance. This in turn hinges on another assumption: that your station in life - be it reporters, soldiers, or bystanders - sets boundaries and requirements of you, which if you fail to live up to then they are to be perceived as a personal shortcoming on your part. So here's the "moral" part: a moral failure is an inability to perform your role up to the standards yourself and others hold it to be. This generates some problems: who sets the standards for how a journalist should act? What is to "neutrally" report the facts? Much as

OKay. But this is different from 'moral knowledge'.

we like to think that journalists have strict deontological codes which they must follow - which they do - they also have strict deadlines and overbearing editors. These standards can, and often do, conflict. This appears to have been a pressing issue for Capa. How to successfully negotiate between those? Is there a conflict-solver role over and above all our social roles we inhabit? Who sets *its* standards? *Is this about professional roles or moral knowledge in a more fundamental sense?*

Say Capa did storm the beach with the first assault wave of troops, and ended up being shot, or for some reason was not able to deliver the negatives on time. He would still be failing in his role as a journalist, albeit in a different way than what we have been discussing. But if failing at your role in different ways can be morally appraised differently, then your adequacy at discharging your role cannot be the sole factor that determines its moral worth. There are other standards which hold irrespective of one's role which we can be held accountable for, one's commitment to being truthful being one of them - which Capa seems to have breached. Such a conclusion is however in tension with what we said earlier of a moral failure as a particular way of failing at your role. *But we can say that lying is not always wrong, can we not? We need not abide by certain rules in order to agree that we can have moral knowledge.*

Capa did discharge his role successfully as a reporter - the enduring impact of the pictures he took attests to that. From the evidence, it also appears he was consciously untruthful in describing his part in the events - which points to another, particular kind of failure. So his actions are morally reprehensible from one perspective, but not from another. But we feel like we do need a secure ground from which to stand on if we want to make the case that such and such action was morally good or bad. ** We can say that lying is not always wrong, can we not? We need not abide by certain rules in order to agree that we can have moral knowledge.*

Where can we find that grounding for our beliefs in the moral sphere, then? One option is to abandon any pretence to ever having a secure ground at all, and make do with provisional justification. We are never fully justified in holding any belief, moral or otherwise. All justification is, and can only be, provisional, as definitive justification would need a non-repeating set of infinite reasons (Klein, 2003, p.44), on pain of circularity. In the absence of those, I can only be at best provisionally justified in believing something, as there can always be an as of yet unformulated reason that outweighs and overturns all the prior ones that I had for believing in it.

On the surface, such an argument makes sense, if the conclusion we draw from it is an appeal against being too hasty in drawing conclusions of a moral nature, or of any other kind. However, if we play the argument out it seems less plausible: would Capa be definitively justified if he was somehow able, from beyond the grave, to endlessly present new sincerely held beliefs as to why he contrived his narrative of the D-Day landing pictures? Can you even have an infinite set of motivating beliefs for *an action*? Assuming provisional justification in the moral sphere as an epistemic attitude that aims to foster a benign

** One could be a very bad person, yet moral knowledge still could exist. And you trying to think about what makes an act morally wrong before you tackle your concern about whether moral knowledge exists?*

scepticism of people's motivations makes perfect sense; to claim that we are forever foreclosed to the possibility of knowing why people act the way they do seems excessive.

In this vein, a possible alternative is to think of scepticism as a way of pressing forward a type of enquiry whose successful conclusion is to secure one's own assent to a belief that has withstood reflection. Such scepticism is what was espoused by the author who critiqued the celebrated account of the D-Day's pictures of Capa. The story just didn't add up, so he chased it further, cross-examining information, interrogating witnesses, learning all the relevant facts surrounding it. Scepticism here serves a different purpose, though. It is not to attain a provisional justification, as that is all we can ever hope to achieve, but instead:

"(...) to be invulnerable to a certain kind of self-condemnation. It is to have beliefs that in our role as truth-seekers we wouldn't criticise ourselves for having even if we were to be deeply reflective. But even if we are deeply satisfied with our beliefs, we cannot be assured of avoiding massive error." (Foley, 1990, p. 329)

This brings back the issue of truthfulness to the fore. It is easy to commend truthfulness, it is less easy to uphold it, especially once one realises how hard it can be, and the heavy price it can exact on ourselves. Truthfulness presupposes an ability to distance oneself from one's sincerely held beliefs, either by self- or shared reflection. In Capa's case this means a willingness to accept his own persona as a celebrated intrepid wartime journalist to be put to question. His premature death prevented him from having to do so. The concerted efforts of those interested in preserving the celebrated narrative ensured it remained the prevailing version of events for the following decades. So at a minimum, a commitment to truthfulness needs wilful participants.

We have been pointing at different ways of grasping the moral significance of Capa's D-Day pictures. We suggested different explanations of what made his actions morally reprehensible: a wilful intention to deceive; a failure at performing a role; a lack of truthfulness in one's self-enquiry. Each performs some explanatory role, but none of them by themselves suffice. The explanations also seem to be in tension with one another. Taken together, they fail to provide a secure framework from which we could confidently make claims to moral knowledge of Capa's actions.

The densely woven interplay of reasons, roles, perceptions, and elusive "facts on the ground" is the moral space Capa, and us all, inhabit. To attain "moral knowledge" from it all seems inordinately difficult, even in a case such as this, where we can confidently claim Capa clearly did *something* we would class as morally wrong. If this is so, then a provisional

conclusion is that we seem to need too many disparate strands to coalesce for any sort of knowledge to be had whenever we enquire why someone did something for some reason. Intentions are at best to be divined; roles are construed; truthfulness requires a willing concerted effort on those who pursue it. If one or several of these factors fail to materialise, as in this case - and in the overwhelming majority of cases in everyday life - we are faced with too many imponderable unknowns to allow us to state with any certainty that what we come up with is actual moral knowledge.

The mirror-distorting self

Consider the case of someone who we have been close friends ^{with} since childhood, someone whom we have always esteemed and confided in over the years, and whose feelings towards us are reciprocal. As of late, an increasing amount of evidence has emerged that points to him having committed some reprehensible action, say stealing money from his workplace, or some such thing. When we are first confronted by rumours of his behaviour, we are appalled by it, and think of such rumours as no more than lies. When asked about it, our friend vehemently protests his innocence. As time goes by, mounting evidence of his culpability piles up, leaving us in doubt. *But is trusting the evidence different from the evidence itself?*

According to Judith Baker, trust, particularly friendship trust, is a type of attitudinal stance that "outruns the evidence" (Baker, 1987, p.809) - evidence that in any other case would make us doubt someone's utterances does not have the same effect in the case of a trusted friend. When it comes to our friend, our trust in him is resistant to damning evidence, up to a degree. Trust does have its limits: there is some amount of counter-evidence that will in all likelihood tilt the scales from trust to us stop believing his protestations of innocence.

Where's the limit for each friendship? And how could we know? We could try to demarcate where exactly the "threshold of confidence" lies by coming up with hypothetical thought experiments with our relatives and friends: "what of X's behaviour could cause me to lose trust in him?" I believe we would find that conjuring up such scenarios is the easy part. What we wouldn't find as easy would be to fully suspend trust in X for a prolonged period of time and then resume it at a later stage, as if nothing had happened - long enough to fully "test our hypothesis" in actual life, say. The reason for our difficulty being that adopting a perspective that depicts our friend's behaviour as contrary to our judgement of him *for a sustained period of time and acting on that assumption* would lead to a change in how we conceive of him as a person, and consequently would lead to a reappraisal of our

⑥

relationship with him. If my friend is capable of such and such and I go through life thinking and acting on that assumption, then he is not the type of person I thought he was. And if that is the case, then he's not really the friend I assumed he was.

"Trust can be thought as the causal and logical condition for there being truths of the kind we call moral. Trust is usually an implicit commitment - it is something we have to assume is there if we are to make sense of his activity, to show that it has a point, or is rational." (Baker, 1987, p.813)

My friend's actions make sense to me because I'm his friend. People who are not friends of his will construe his behaviour and rationale differently: either because they see things that I fail to see, or - what is more likely - because they are oblivious to aspects of his personality only I am privy to, from the vantage point of my friendship with him.

Now let's say that going over these ideas, I come to find them persuasive, and become convinced of the importance of trust in *all* human relationships. I consciously commit to gradually become more trusting of others, and to reciprocate that trust by becoming more trustworthy myself. In short, I endeavour to become a *trusting person*. To think of myself in this way is to classify myself in a way that yields truths about how I feel, act and behave in specific contexts, which not only hold retroactively - they help shed new light over my past behaviour - but also allow myself and others to make fairly accurate predictions of how I will feel, think and act in the future in comparably similar situations.

This ascription of bits of human behaviour that aspires to generalisation and aims to provide law-like patterns of intelligibility and predictive power fits well with Ian Hacking's characterisation of human kinds (Hacking, 1996, p.357):

- trust is a highly relevant kind: As we saw above, it is an indispensable prerequisite for us to make sense of the actions of those close to us
- it is peculiar to people: the "trust" animals have in their owners, for instance, is of an altogether different nature than the one we can have for each other as human beings
- it is something which we very much want to have knowledge of: what conditions engender trust, which cause it to break down, what is it like to behave in a trustworthy manner, and so on
- we have an inclination to project this kind of behaviour to the person: we freely discuss the existence of trusting people, of excessively gullible individuals, of mistrusting cynics, of a lack of trust in current society, etc.

Belief in moral knowledge.
~~virtue~~ ~~is~~ is compatible with what you say here.

To identify yourself with a given human kind - to see yourself as a trusting person - is to incorporate the norms that regulate its uses, and to evince the modes of feeling, thought and action that instantiate them. Trustworthy people believe in their friends's utterances well beyond what a cold calculating reason would advocate as best in that situation. The particular ways that confidence takes shape depends upon the context and the particular relationship one finds himself in. And, just as importantly, your identification with the category also is what gives it explanatory power in predicting behaviour. You might have not thought of yourself as a trusting individual before, but once it is brought to your attention that it is something constitutive of your way of self-understanding, it provides your actions with a meaning which you may not have been aware before, which in turn further reinforces its effect in your dealings with others.

✓ But is someone behaving virtuously different from virtue itself or from saying that we have knowledge of virtuous behaviour or that its consequences are seen in the world.

Particular ascriptions of thought, feeling, desire and action bind those who identify themselves with them in a self-reinforcing pattern - this is part of the "looping effect" Hacking discusses. The looping effect is something which we cannot fully control, much in the same way as we don't control the underlying perceptual mechanisms that determine how we see objects as coloured or how we grasp utterances into meaningful discourse. What we do have some measure of control over is the kind of looping patterns we allow ourselves to be caught into. So why are "human kinds", as Hacking understands them, a problem for the possibility of moral knowledge? Because it is questionable if a choice between them is really there to be had, if "choice" is to be understood as the rational selection of something we aspire to get right (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015, pp. 76). What are the *right* human kinds I would want to identify with? Worse: how can I even begin to answer that question?

Any attempt to give a comparative account of those modes of self-understanding has to take into consideration the fact that, as we saw from the example of trust, some human kinds preclude the very possibility of shifting between critical engagement and disengagement which we need to do in order be able to choose which patterns we want to identify with. As we saw, you can't really "put trust on hold" and live the life of an unabashed cynic when it comes to your friends for a significant amount of time, and then slip back into fully trusting them at will. Those relations will inevitably suffer, and your self-identification as a trusting person with it.

So it may be the case that the identification with some human kinds forecloses possibilities of identification with certain others, and that we end up in a position where we are not capable of discerning what it is exactly we are depriving ourselves of. An avowed cold-hearted cynic, who frames all human relationships as being purely transactional in

nature, is likely to have a view of trust and its structural importance in human relationships that is radically different from Judith Baker, whom we quoted earlier, for instance.

Now why is this significant, from a moral point of view? Because human kinds are more than differences in outlook on a given subject, that can be easily bridged by appealing to a chain of reasoning that both interlocutors would find convincing. They are ways in which we frame knowledge about ourselves and others. They are what allow me to see a certain way of behaving as imbued with purpose while other ways aren't, why some rationale for action makes sense to me while others don't. So if some human kinds "lock me out" of other significant human kinds, I may not be able to bridge that gap unless I myself change, until I come to see myself as identifying with the opposite, or an altogether different human kind. But it may very well be the case that I may find no compelling reasons, from within my own human constellation of self-identifications, to do so. A cold-hearted cynic will doubtless find constant validation of his own thesis about the self-interested nature of people all around him; but so will a trusting person of *his* views in all of his relations with others.

Hacking envisions human kinds as an unavoidable feature of our contemporary ethical and social landscape (Hacking, pp 364). We cannot make sense of ourselves without them, and to wish them away is pointless. But if that is so, then they seem to pose a particular kind of barrier to moral knowledge: they constrain us into ways of making sense of ourselves and the world within which we may not always have the epistemic resources to adequately appraise our own lives and those around us. My self-identifications can prevent me from acquiring genuine moral knowledge of myself and others.

Yes, but this is not to say that we should be sceptical of its existence. I think your discussions are saying something different.

Conclusion

We explored the difficulties of acquiring moral knowledge from two different perspectives.

✓ In the first scenario we explored the tensions between conflicting accounts of what makes an action morally wrong. We saw that neither the intention to deceive via misrepresentation of one's actions, nor a failure to perform one's socially established role by themselves suffice as adequate grounds for moral knowledge. ✓ We then explored the possibility that we can get at best provisional justification for our moral beliefs. This yielded another necessary but not sufficient requisite for morality, one's commitment to truthfulness. We concluded by affirming

9

that only if these different strands of justification cohere can we aspire to have moral knowledge; but being that they seldom do, such knowledge remains elusive.

In the second scenario we developed a conception of trust as a necessary requisite for making sense of the behaviour of those close to us, and as constitutive of the type of relationship we have with them. Afterwards we characterised trust as a human kind. As such, it is subject to a "looping effect", mostly beyond the agent's control, where self-identification with the category further reinforces and validates its role in determining said agent's behaviour. We then remarked that different human kinds can be disjunctive. This can hinder the possibility of the agent selecting between alternative or conflicting human kinds, as such choice may not present itself as one the agent would find rationally compelling to make from within his self-identifications. We concluded by affirming that this poses an additional barrier to moral knowledge. ✓

[Word count excluding title: 4221]

References

- Baker, J. (1987). Trust and Rationality. In: *Epistemology - An Anthology*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing (2008), pp. 807-814
- Coleman, A (2019). Debunking the Myths of Robert Capa on D-Day. Available from: <https://petapixel.com/2019/02/16/debunking-the-myths-of-robert-capa-on-d-day/> [Accessed 23/04/2022]
- Dreyfus, H. and Taylor C. (2015). *Retrieving Realism*, Harvard University Press
- Foley, R. (1990). Skepticism and Rationality. In: *Epistemology - An Anthology*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing (2008), pp. 322-332
- Hacking, I. (1996). The looping Effects of Human Kinds. In: *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, pp.351-395

②

Klein, P. (2003). How a Pyrrhonian Skeptic Might Respond to Academic Skepticism. In: *Epistemology - An Anthology*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing (2008), pp. 35-50

MacIntyre A. (2016). *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity - An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, Cambridge University Press

65/6

This is a well written piece of work that achieves a certain degree of individuality. However, there is a tension between what you want to do & aim to do in this essay, and what you end up doing. You want to ~~investigate~~ explore whether moral knowledge itself stands firm against skepticism, but you end up exploring what we can genuinely know about another's behaviour & how we can / whether we can appraise it in a way that allows us to attribute or not attribute certain virtues to them. There appears to be a confusion between that which we evaluate & the objects or beings being evaluated. Further, moral knowledge itself could exist, without any one behaving morally. So there are some confusions at a conceptual level but theories in meta-ethics could help here considerably. I think Tristan Nash's module will help a lot in this regard. That said, you have made an excellent attempt at ~~assessing~~ difficulties in the topic & you present clear, relatively well sustained arguments. And the essay is a very good piece of work, but I think you are trying to cover too much ground. (16)