

MORAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Aim: to capture a particular, philosophically interesting way in which experience can be essential for the acquisition of moral knowledge by way of building on the taxonomy introduced by Sarah McGrath in her “Moral Knowledge and Experience”.

Starting point: a literary illustration of this way in the short story “A Hanging” by George Orwell.

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working — bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming — all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned — reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone — one mind less, one world less.

Four ways in which experience can contribute to moral knowledge, in decreasing degrees of innocuousness:

- **EMPIRICAL:** Contributing to knowledge of the moral status of concrete particulars by supplying the empirical premises needed to apply pure moral propositions
- **ENABLING:** Contributing to knowledge of pure moral propositions by putting one in a position to grasp some of the concepts which are part of the content of pure moral propositions
- **SENSITIZING:** Contributing to the knowledge of the moral status of concrete particulars by putting one in a position to reliably apply moral concepts to concrete particulars such as actions, circumstances etc.
- **TRIGGERING:** Contributing to the knowledge of pure moral propositions by prompting one to make the judgments corresponding to these propositions as a reaction to being confronted with concrete situations to which these propositions apply to

A fifth and more ambitious way in which experience can contribute to attaining moral knowledge:

- EVIDENCE: Contributing to knowledge of pure moral propositions by providing evidence for them

TRIGGERING vs. EVIDENCE

PRO TRIGGERING #1

1. Experience contributes to achieving moral knowledge just as it contributes to mathematical knowledge.
2. Experience can only put one in a position to achieve knowledge of mathematical truths by triggering one's cognitive capacities the activation of which helps one achieve this knowledge. (E.g. children might come to know that three plus two equals five by experiencing what happens when they put three pebbles and two pebbles together.
3. Ergo: experience can put one in a position to achieve moral knowledge by triggering one's cognitive capacities the activation of which helps one achieve this knowledge.

OBJECTIONS:

- 2 is false: even in mathematics, experience can play more than a triggering role.

PRO TRIGGERING #2

1. The contribution of experience to achieving moral knowledge can be replaced without loss by the contribution of imagination to achieving moral knowledge.
2. Imagination does not play an evidential role (but only a triggering role) to achieving moral knowledge.
3. Ergo: Experience does not play an evidential (but only a triggering) role to achieving moral knowledge.

OBJECTIONS:

- 1 is misleading: even if experience could be replaced without loss by the imagination, it might still be the case that there is an epistemic asymmetry between imagination and experience
- 2 is false: imagination can play an evidential role if it is exercised correctly, i.e. if it correctly simulates experience

PRO EVIDENCE #1

Accurately describing the phenomenology of what happens in the short story by George Orwell requires attributing a justificatory role to experience with regards to coming to know the pure moral proposition that "cutting a life short in its full tide" is morally wrong.

PRO EVIDENCE #2

1. Both in the mathematical as well as in the moral case, experience can constitute counterevidence against a pure moral (or mathematical) belief.
2. Ergo, it also constitute positive evidence.