

Understanding Moral Understanding¹

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Abstract

Having moral understanding of moral truths leads one to act more virtuously and morally. To encourage more moral growth, it is necessary to cultivate moral understanding — which would require finding out what moral understanding contains. In this paper, I explore the content of moral understanding. I argue that moral understanding contains both propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge. The more relevant experiential knowledge one possesses, the more moral understanding he or she has, and the more likely she or he will act morally.

Introduction

In “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology,” Alison Hills introduces the idea of “moral understanding.” She claims that in order to make use of moral information, it is not enough that one has moral knowledge but that one should have moral understanding as well. According to Hills, for any moral knowledge P, the corresponding moral understanding *leads* to P, explains *why* P, and is essential to acting well (Hills 18). In this paper, I will further explore the concept of “moral understanding” and try to explain what it is composed of. Knowing the content of moral understanding can help devise methods to cultivate moral understanding, which in turn can be used to increased moral growth in society. I argue that in most paradigmatic cases of moral knowledge, moral understanding involves both propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge — but the propositional knowledge can only be grasped with some

¹ Shout-out to Professor Marsh for suggesting this palindromic title.

relevant experiential knowledge. By propositional knowledge, I mean the type of knowledge that can be expressed as a proposition or a statement like “the sky is blue” or “crows are black”. By experiential knowledge, I mean knowledge that can only be gained through experiences such as learning to ride a bicycle. I will begin by summarizing moral knowledge and moral understanding on Hills’s account. Then I will define propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge and analyze the difference between the two by invoking some recent debates in the area. Next, I will use examples to show that in most typical moral truths, the reasoning and understanding involved will always infer back to some kind of experiential knowledge. Finally, I will show that the more relevant experiential knowledge one has, the more likely it is for the said person to act morally.

1. A Closer Look at Hills’s Definition

Suppose I hold the moral proposition P. Because I hold P, I have knowledge of P. But I only have moral understanding if I also know *why* P (let’s call this P’) and arrive at P from P’. For example, let P be the moral proposition “eating meat is wrong.” An appropriate corresponding P’ would be “current farming practices are cruel and unethical.” According to Hills, “Moral understanding involves a grasp of a relation between a moral proposition and the reason why it is true. (Hills 6)” This means that I can know both P and P’ but still would not have moral understanding if I am unable to connect the concepts in P’ to arrive at P. I can know that “current farming practices are cruel and unethical” and also know that “eating meat is wrong” as two separate pieces of knowledge, but as long as the first piece of knowledge does not lead me to arrive at the second piece of knowledge, I do not have moral understanding in this situation. In

this sense, moral understanding involves a type of *relationship* between P and P' such that P is based on P'. To have moral understanding, an agent would have to know P, P', and recognize this basing relationship. To Hills, understanding this basing relationship is crucial because it means the knower has “the ability to make appropriate judgements in similar cases” (Hills 6) to generate new moral truths. Hills also believes because that the process of obtaining moral understanding is something the knower must go through him or herself, “Understanding therefore is always a kind of achievement for [the knower]” (Hills 6). The knower may come to moral understanding with the aid of others, but moral understanding cannot easily transfer from one person to another through testimony. The knower needs to personally engage in this process to obtain moral understanding for him or herself.

2. Further Defining Moral Understanding

If moral understanding is more than knowing both P and P', and this understanding cannot be transferred easily through testimony of others, it would seem fair to treat moral understanding as something different from an additional piece of knowledge in propositional form. It may help to break moral understanding into two parts: 1) knowing moral reasoning (P') and 2) being able to apply P' to arrive at P.

Indeed, Hills agrees with this conclusion and points out the similarities between moral understanding and knowing-how (Hills 7). According to Gilbert Ryle, there are two types of knowledge: knowledge-that and knowledge-how. Knowledge-that would typically be in the form “something has the characteristic of something,” Ryle defines this type of knowledge as a relation between a thinker and a true proposition. For instance, I know *that* the sky is blue if I

possess the knowledge *that* the sky is blue. Knowledge-how, on the other hand, would be considered an ability and does not involve propositional claims — for example, knowing *how* to ride a bicycle is an ability not a claim (Ryle 1946).

Applying Ryle's distinction to a moral context, it seems fair then to treat moral knowledge (P) as a type of knowledge-that while moral understanding as *both* knowledge-that and knowledge-how. If I have knowledge-*that* "stealing is wrong," I know *that* stealing is wrong. There is a relation between I (the thinker) and a true proposition (P, stealing is wrong) such that I have the information P thus am aware of it. If I have moral understanding of *how* "stealing is wrong," I have 1) the moral reasoning (P') *that* which explain why "stealing is wrong" and 2) I know *how* to apply these moral reasoning such that I arrive at the moral truth "stealing is wrong." Part 1 of moral understanding consists of me possessing some sort of moral reasoning (P'), which is presented in the form of proposition(s). Here exists a relation between I and a true proposition (P') such that I have the information P' and am aware of it — indicating that this is a type of knowledge-that. Part 2 of moral understanding involves me possessing the *ability to apply* P' so that I arrive at P. The ability to apply P' requires that I not only be aware of P' but that I am convinced of it on a visceral level such that I am able to recognize P' and apply P' under different circumstances. In order for me to be viscerally convinced of P', I must have the relevant experience(s) which P' refers to. This ability is not so different from the ability to ride a bike — the only way to be able to ride a bike is to go through and gain the various experiences of practicing riding a bike. I will elaborate further on this part in section 4. The point I want to make here is that moral knowledge (P) and moral reasoning (P') are both knowledge-that and are thus both propositional knowledge, *while the ability to go from P' to P* involves some sort of relevant

experience(s) — I call this experiential knowledge. Given that moral understanding involves 1) knowing P' and 2) having the ability to go from P' to P, it is fair to conclude that moral understanding contains of both propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge.

3. Existing Counter Arguments

So far my argument consists largely of the distinction between propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge, which draw heavily on the distinction between knowledge-that and knowledge-how as defined by Ryle. However, not everyone accepts Ryle's distinction. Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, in their article "Knowing How," contend that knowledge-how is a specie of knowledge-that. Given the bicycle riding example, the ability to ride a bicycle would require the rider to "know some proposition of the relevant form, that is, for some way w , [the rider] know that w is a way for [the rider] to ride a bicycle" (Williamson and Stanley 2001). If Stanley and Williamson are right that knowledge-how is a kind of knowledge-that, one may argue, based the analogous relationships between knowledge-how and experiential knowledge, that experiential knowledge is merely a type of propositional knowledge. One may then conclude that both part 1 and part 2 of moral understanding are propositional knowledge. I do not want to argue against Williamson and Stanley here — knowledge-how may very well be a type of knowledge-that. Instead, I want to point out that in order to have a certain knowledge-how (i.e. have a certain ability), one must have some form of knowledge that is experiential in nature and cannot be put in propositional form.

Knowing how to ride a bicycle requires the rider to successfully ride a bicycle. The process of riding the bicycle requires the rider to rely heavily on his or her senses such as

balance, touch, and sight. If Stanley and Williamson are right, the said proposition w would involve some instruction on how to operate these senses. It would seem difficult, almost impossible, to understand instructions describing these senses (qualitative or quantitatively) without having experienced these senses before. Suppose I have lived in an environment with 0 gravity all my life and have never experienced my sense of balance. How will I know the proper way to use my sense of balance on a bicycle such that I do not fall if I have not had first-hand familiarity with it through experience? I can definitely know proposition w , but without having the experiences that w refers to, I will not know how to apply w such that I gain the ability to ride a bicycle successfully. Similarly, in the moral context, in order for me to gain the ability to derive P from P' , it is essential that I have the experiences which P' refers to. The only way for me to have these experiences is for me to go through them myself as oppose to learning some proposition that may describe them.

4. Experiential Knowledge

Let us look at an example of moral knowledge: racial discrimination is wrong (P). Given that knowledge requires true belief, if I know *that* P , I believe that P — I believe that racial discrimination is wrong. I can associate racial discrimination with a sense of moral disapprobation. If moral understanding requires ability to infer P from P' , given that I believe that P , I better believe that P' as well. P' is based on a series of propositions which make references to certain real-world experiences. In order to believe these additional propositions, one must be able to associate with the experiences mentioned in P' with one's own. Let's look at a possible P' for P that racial discrimination is wrong:

Racial discrimination is a type of unequal treatment that is grounded in the belief that people in certain racial groups worth less compared those in other groups. This belief devalues the dignity of those discriminated, lowers their intrinsic worth, and is thus unethical and ought not to be done.

Suppose I am just coming in contact with the concept "racial discrimination," as well as concepts in P' as explained above, I may still be unconvinced and question why devaluing the dignity of others is unethical. Upon further reflection, I may come to the reasoning that devaluing the worth of others causes them a sense of pain, shame, or other similar aversive sensations and I ought not to do that. Yet I can only come to this reasoning and be convinced of it if I have an understanding of aversive sensations such as pain, shame, or anger. And because these are sensations, I cannot come to grasp them unless I experience these sensations. My experience with aversive sensations allows me to relate my judgements of these sensations to possible judgements formed by others experiencing sensations of the same kind. In other words, because I find these sensations strongly undesirable, I will try my best to avoid them; others are likely to find them equally undesirable, therefore I ought not to cause such sensations in others. To be clear, I am not saying all moral propositions reduce to experiential knowledge. I am simply saying that, in order to be *able to use moral reasoning (P') to arrive at a certain moral knowledge (P)*, one must believe the relevant moral reasoning (P'). P' will always refer to some real-world experience. In order to believe P', one must be familiar with the said real-world experience through one's own experience.

5. Levels of Understanding

Consider the following story². Suppose we have a man named Matthew who lives in an entirely racially homogeneous town. Matthew lived in this town his whole life and has never seen a person from a different racial and cultural background in person before. The main connection Matthew has with the world outside his town is through watching television. From watching television, Matthew knows that racial discrimination is wrong. But Matthew engages in some rather racist activities — in particular, he likes to tell and laugh at racially insulting jokes. Since the town is filled with people of the same race and culture as Matthew, no one ever tells Matthew that telling racist jokes are harmful and wrong. Suppose that Matthew goes into a large and racially diverse city for the first time and befriends Austin of the same racial background. Matthew sees a woman of a different race and tells a racially insulting joke based on her to Austin. Austin is immediately appalled and upset — not only because Austin recognize this joke as wrong and insulting, but also because Austin is friends with that woman (let's call her Shu). Austin tells Matthew that racist jokes are wrong and ought not to be told. Hearing this for the first time, Matthew is shocked but accepts what Austin tells him because Matthew does not want to upset Austin. In this case, *telling racist jokes is wrong* is the relevant moral knowledge P. Matthew now knows P and have some understanding of P based on the P'₁ that *racist jokes upsets his friend Austin which also upsets Matthew himself*. Now suppose Matthew later comes to interact with Shuhao and befriends her. Upon reflection, Matthew comes to the second reasoning (P'₂) that *Racist jokes are insulting and hurtful to Shuhao and others of her background. Shuhao feels strongly about people of her background. Upsetting Shuhao and those*

² Another shout-out to Professor Marsh for helping with this story during office hours.

that Shuhao cares about also upsets Matthew himself. This situation presupposes that Matthew is familiar with the aversive sensation of being mentally upset because he has been upset before and did not enjoy it. With experiences of interacting with people from other racial backgrounds, Matthew is now able to believe both P'_1 and P'_2 . That is, having seen Austin upset allows Matthew to empathize with Austin's painful upset, while coming to know Shuhao allows Matthew to empathize with Shuhao and others sharing Shuhao's background.

Note that P'_1 is less persuading compared to P'_2 when conveying P. When Matthew only believes P'_1 , Matthew may still tell racist jokes (which opposes what P maintains) when Austin is not around. But when Matthew comes to believe P'_2 , because P'_2 includes “other people from Shuhao's background” and “upsetting them will also upset Matthew himself,” Matthew is less likely to tell racist jokes regardless of the presence of either Austin or Shuhao. Matthew came to believe P'_2 only after personally interacting with Shuhao — which is a closer personal experience than getting to know Shuhao through Austin. This shows that the closer the experience is to oneself, the more likely will one be viscerally convinced of the relevant moral reasoning. Suppose Matthew also experiences being the subject of a racist joke, then Matthew would have personally experienced pain caused by racist jokes. Under this situation, Matthew might form the reasoning (P'_3) that *racist jokes are as painful to others as they are to himself, causing others pain in this way reminds himself of his past painful experience. He does not wish to be reminded of this painful experience and does not wish to cause others this similar pain.* This particular moral reasoning (P'_3) involves the most personal experience yet. Matthew here (possessing P'_1 , P'_2 , and P'_3) can make the easiest connection between his own pain and the pain experienced by others because they are both a result of similar eliciting situations — the telling

of racist jokes. Because Matthew is able to make this connection quickly and easily, he is viscerally convinced of P'_3 . When Matthew comes across other similar eliciting situations then, he will recognize P'_3, P'_2, P'_1 in these situations and derive new moral knowledge corresponding for each situation.

The closer and more personal the experience is when one comes to understand P' , the more convinced one will be of P' . The stronger one is convinced of P' , and the more P' 's one hold, the easier and more likely it is for one to grasp $P'(s)$ and apply it to derive P . The more likely it is for one to be able to go from P' to P , the more moral understanding one have. To sum up, the more personal experiences one has relevant to a set of particular moral reasoning, the more moral understanding the said person has.

6. Conclusion

In order for one to have moral understanding, one must have two kinds of knowledge:

1. One must possess a certain moral reasoning P' that explains *why* P (a certain moral knowledge). P' is propositional.
2. One must be able to apply P' in similar but different eliciting situations such that one arrives at new versions of P .

Part 2 of moral understanding involves a type of ability. This ability requires one to believe P' — which involves one having the experiences as mentioned in P' . The more and more personal the experiences are, the more convinced one is of P' — leading one of have more moral understanding. The more moral understanding one has, the easier it is for one to arrive at new moral knowledge in different but similar situations — allowing one to act more morally.

Outside Sources

Ryle, Gilbert. "I.—Knowing How and Knowing That: The Presidential Address." *Proc Aristot Soc Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 46.1 (1946): 1-16.

Stanley, Jason, and Timothy Williamson. "Knowing How." *The Journal of Philosophy* 98.8 (2001): 411.