Enquiry IX

The Enquirer ponders the question of whether there are moral truths, whether there is a method for discovering them, and what the reach and limits of moral knowledge might be. She considers in what sense there has been moral progress and an increase of moral knowledge in the world.

Before I began to doubt everything I had previously thought about morality, and came to wonder whether there were any true and false moral opinions or any moral knowledge, I made various judgements with some degree of confidence. The following actions are examples of the sort of behaviour I judged to be in most cases morally wrong:

1. An ambitious politician poisons a political rival.
2. A police officer tortures a prisoner to make them confess.
3. A woman tells a man the falsehood that she is pregnant to persuade him to marry her.
4. A man refuses to take a paternity test to establish whether he is the father of a woman’s child.
5. A student writes for and sells essays to other students.
6. A mother chains her young child to the bedpost to go to a disco.
7. An employer profits magnificently by forcing his employees to work long hours for low pay.

And actions like these I judged to be in most cases morally worthy:

8. An ambitious politician resigns his post to care for his recently disabled wife.
9. A police officer intervenes to stop a colleague from manhandling a prisoner.
10. A woman tells a family-oriented man who is getting serious about her that she is unable to bear children.
11. A man assumes financial responsibility for a child born outside of wedlock and helps to care for it.
12. A teenager takes a wallet full of cash they found on the bus to the police without removing any of it.
13. A mother works long hours to pay for art supplies for her talented child.
14. An employer responds promptly and effectively to employee grievances.

At the same time, I don’t suppose my judgements to be infallible and I don’t suppose that I have always known how to behave. I take it as given that I have sometimes been in the wrong morally, that I have sometimes given others decisive moral reason to resent my actions, and that I have failed to do on occasion what I ought to have done. While it is possible that I have behaved with impeccable correctness at every point, I regard this as highly unlikely. For I occasionally notice what I take to be moral failures in the people around me, and it would be a miracle if either there actually were no moral failures at all in the world or if I was unique in escaping them. So I shall suppose that I am in the wrong an average amount of the time—neither as morally good as the most saintly and self-sacrificing persons nor as morally bad as the most exploitative and selfish, but somewhere in between.

Another reason for supposing that I have sometimes been morally in the wrong is that I know myself to have often behaved imprudently, to have done things that were not in my long-term self-interest. That is to say, I privileged the needs and comforts of my Present Self at the expense of my Future Self in ways I came to recognise as wrong. Because concern for others is like concern for my Future Self, I can assume that I have often privileged the interests of my Narrow Self over the needs and comforts not only of Strangers, but even of those of my Extended Self.

If I can determine how I discovered my prudential mistakes and what led to them, I may correspondingly gain some insight into the source of my moral errors and how to prevent them. If moral knowledge involves the avoidance or the correction of moral mistakes, it may turn out to be less mysterious than I have hitherto supposed.

Reflecting on the times when I have acted imprudently, against my own best interests, I realise that these errors fall into various categories. For example:

1. Food: I have occasionally followed my appetites and later felt sick as a result of eating too much, or eating food that was too fat or too sweet, or food that, unbeknownst to me, contained some pathogen or poisonous substance.
2. Indulgences: I have felt powerfully inclined to excess—for example to drinking too much alcohol. Drinking too much has left me nauseated and hung over, regretting my actions.
3. Finance: I have been miserly when I would have derived great pleasure from a purchase and a spendthrift when the purchase was wasteful and unsatisfying.
4. Society: I have been powerfully attracted to friends who were not good for me, avoided some who probably would have been good for me, and wasted time with others. I have written letters hastily and emotionally that did much damage to my own interests.

What do these instances of misjudgement have in common that makes them different from situations where I knew what was good for me and acted accordingly?

In certain of these cases, some properties of the things with which I was interacting—foods, drinks, commodities, other people—were unknown to me. I was unable to tell from the qualities they presented to me that they were bad for me, for they had qualities that appeared to me to be very good indeed. Food seemed tasty, alcohol seemed to be having a good effect on my mood, it was agreeable to spend money and carry away my purchases, and people struck me as attractive or unattractive.

In other cases—my writing of hasty letters—the strength of my own emotions seemed to push me to an action that turned out to be harmful to my interests, though performing it felt necessary and rewarding at the time.
How can nature have made me so that I spontaneously sometimes do what is better for me but sometimes what is worse for me? How can I have survived a rigorous process of natural selection when I so often act imprudently against my self-interest?

My mistake, in all the cases I have just cited, involved being unable to see beneath the appearances, to predict the future, and to be motivated by what was in fact most likely to happen. In some cases, there was no way for me to know what was going to happen, for example, in the case of a rare pathogen infesting my food. In other cases, I could have ascertained the danger if I had had more experience, or investigated more thoroughly. If I knew all the real, underlying, hidden properties of things and people and did not react to their superficial qualities, and if I had more insight into causal relations in the world, I would reduce my prudential errors.

Yet it seems that I might know a great deal about things and people and about causal relations and yet still suffer from weakness of the will. An expert in substance abuse might, for example, drink too much at a party, despite knowing more than everyone else in attendance about the effects of alcohol. I might know very well that the letter I was going to write would not advance my cause and might cause trouble for me, yet be so angry or so flattered that I could not resist.

Reflecting on this matter, I have arrived at three explanations of my liability to misjudge what is better for me.

First, even if my world-imprinted inclinations and tendencies sometimes lead me to do what is worse for me, they facilitate my survival and reproduction most of the time, or facilitated the survival and reproduction of my ancestors. There must be a reason why strong emotions often move me to immediate action and why I try to conserve effort in other situations.

Second, some of my world-imprinted inclinations and tendencies may be the unfortunate by-products of others that are good for me. There must be a reason why my brain responds positively to intoxication—if I had a different sort of brain that did not respond in this way, I might not function as well as I do.

Third, some of my choices reflect social pressure or are made possible by my culture and upbringing. I may yield, unwisely, to my host’s urging to have another glass of champagne. If I had not learned how to type and post letters I could not have written the letter that caused me to be expelled from the Club, however annoyed I felt. It was the interaction of my world-imprinted desires with the pressures of the social environment and the cultural materials at hand that brought about my misfortune in both cases.

I can draw several morals from this, recognizing that my spontaneous judgements about my own self-interest are liable to error:

First, I must become aware of and acknowledge my innate dispositions, which are the product of a long history of natural selection, consider the situations in which they mislead me, and control my appetites when experience has taught me that the outcome will be bad for me.

Second, I must become aware of how conventions, hearsay, informal opinions about what usually happens, and other people's expectations of me can assist or mislead me. I must think about how I am like or different from the average person. I must consider myself as a statistic, but also as an individual.

Can I do more than this to decide how it will be in my self-interest to act? I do not see how this is possible. Perhaps it will
turn out, because of the way events unfold, that my actual decision produces more unhappiness, deprivation or regret for me, than another decision would have. But I can rarely know for sure what the other decision would have led to, or what its broad, long term effect on other people would have been. There is no fact of the matter about how the choice I did not make would have turned out and perhaps no fact of the matter as to whether I ought instead to have chosen that path.

Applying these lessons to the detection of moral error, I think I can see the way forward. Moral error is likely to result when I rely too heavily on my natural appetites and partialities, failing to consider the effects on other people, those close to me as well as distant Strangers, of giving them free reign. While these appetites and partialities may be deeply ingrained in my constitution, I can become aware of their operation in me and their harmful effects on others. It is not only my aggressive, competitive, self-seeking tendencies that I need to become aware of and to moderate but even certain built-in cognitive tendencies such as the tendency to stereotype people and to make overly hasty inferences about their intelligence, competence, or deservingness. A pernicious habit of judgement is my assumption that people by and large deserve their misfortunes; that, were they more prudent and resourceful, they would not suffer the fates they do.20 My tendency to defer to strong, charismatic leaders and to avoid making a fuss even when I become aware of wrongdoing also creates moral failure.

All these habits and tendencies are shared with others of my species and are the main sources of our collective moral failures. They exacerbate self-centeredness and the refusal to consider seriously the position of Person 2 in morally relevant interactions. Further, moral error is likely to result to the extent that I am ignorant about the world, not only about cause and effect and the lessons of history, but about other people’s needs, desires, feelings, and reactions.

It occurs to me now that before I came to doubt everything I was taught a set of rival theories, invented or discovered by the great philosophers of the past. These included Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Virtue Theory. Embedded in their more general accounts of human nature and moral motivation were certain implied tests for evaluating proposed or completed courses of action to determine their status as morally permissible, forbidden (insofar as it is physically possible to do what is morally forbidden), obligatory, good, wrong, etc. These tests appeared to be constructed more or less as follows.

1. Utilitarianism: Contemplate the situation facing you and consider how you could act. Would one possible course of action serve better than another to increase the total amount of happiness or well-being in the world, or to decrease the total amount of pain and frustration? If you have already acted, ask yourself what the consequences of your action were in this regard.

2. Kantianism: Contemplate your situation and consider how you could act. Review the various possibilities, asking of each alternative course of action: What would it be like if everyone did this in the same situation? Could I coherently will that everyone act in this way in this situation? If you have already acted, ask yourself whether your action could have been so willed.

3. Virtue Theory: Contemplate your situation and consider how you could act or what you did. Does or did a particular course of action exemplify a virtue, such as truthfulness, fidelity, generosity, temperance, mercy, or kindness? Does or did it exemplify a vice such as greed, lust, cruelty, dishonesty, injustice?

Each of these proposed tests divides proposed and completed actions into distinct evaluative categories. Utilitarianism (of which there are many subspecies) says that actions that increase the amount of happiness or well-being in the world are morally good and ought to be performed, whilst those that increase the amount of pain and frustration in the world are morally bad and should be eschewed.21 Kantianism says that actions that cannot be universalised are forbidden.22 Actions whose opposites cannot be universalised are obligatory. Virtue theory says to practice virtue and
avoid vice. It is conceivable that applying one of these procedures will lead me to all and only moral truths. But how could I possibly come to know that one or the other of these procedures—or some version of one or the other—is capable of delivering all and only moral truths if I cannot identify the moral truths in the first place? And if I can know which are the moral truths independently of using the theories, why should I be interested in the theories? If the theory conflicts with my own judgement about what I should or may do, directing me, for example, to torture an innocent person to produce a great social benefit, does that mean my judgement was wrong? Or does it indicate that there is something wrong with the theory?23

In fact, there is remarkable convergence amongst the three major classes of moral theory and a good fit with my own spontaneous judgements. The agents in cases 1–7 above all seem to manifest vices, and the agents in cases 8–14, virtues. Kantianism also seems to condemn the actions in cases 1–7 as wrong, for I would not judge it permissible for agents to behave in this way whenever they felt like it. Conversely, I would welcome the universalisation of the behaviour described in cases 8–14. The Utilitarian evaluation also matches the results of the others. In 1–7, the happiness or well-being of Person 1 is less than the suffering endured by Person 2. In 8–14, there is a small burden to the agent, Person 1, outweighed by a great benefit to Person 2. Insofar as all three theories agree with one another and are in conformity with my spontaneous judgements, I am disposed to regard my own judgements as secure and the theories as good normative theories.

There is a problem, however, with taking these good fits as conclusive evidence for the reliability of my judgements and the excellence of the moral theories. In astronomy, a good theory accounts for the observed and recorded motions of the celestial bodies and predicts future celestial appearances better than its rivals do. The theory in this case is said to be ‘empirically adequate.’ If a moral theory were like a scientific theory in this regard, it would prove its worth not only by agreeing with previous ‘observations’ such as those just cited, but by predicting new observations—my assent or dissent from various proposals about the moral qualities of my targets of appraisal. But I can see that this proposal will not vindicate the choice of a theory that gives the right answers to moral questions. Rather it will vindicate the choice of a theory that accurately captures and predicts my judgements about right and wrong. It will be empirically adequate as a theory of my Normative Kit, but not as a theory of Moral Reality. Isn’t it possible after all both that my spontaneous judgements are wrong and that the theories that predict them are inadequate? Maybe the behaviour described in 1–7 is really morally good and the behaviour in 8–14 is really morally objectionable?

If a sceptic were to make this objection to me, I would be baffled. I would want to know what this sceptic could possibly mean by their claim that these moral judgements of mine are possibly upside down. In what sort of world could the agents in 8–14 be virtuous and those in 1–7 vicious? I should admit, however, that by adding certain embellishments to the situations as they were sketched, the moral status of the actions described would appear to me differently. I might not judge it wrong for a starving employee to filch money from the exploitative boss’s desk. If the moral theories back me up on this, this should increase my confidence in them as well as in my own judgement. If, however, my judgement is at odds with them all, I shall face a dilemma without a formal solution. I must either admit that my judgement was wrong or declare the theories inadequate.

Further, despite their remarkable convergence on many cases, the three major moral theories can conflict in their pronouncements. A truthful, hence ‘virtuous’ declaration might add to the quantity of misery in the world. It would accordingly be proscribed by the Utilitarian. A Virtue Theorist would protest that many actions which produce more happiness than misery are morally wrong, such as cutting up one healthy person to transplant her organs into five sick people to save their lives—virtuous doctors do not do this. Which theory should I be led by, Utilitarianism or Virtue
Theory? Or suppose I am wondering: ‘May I lie to my mother to protect my brother?’ If the Utilitarian answers ‘Yes!—you may, provided the happiness produced by your doing so outweighs the distress,’ but the Kantian answers ‘No!—you could not will consistently that lies can be told whenever they spare a person distress,’ what shall I do? The Virtue Theorist can only tell me that there is no unique answer, that I can exemplify the virtue of truthfulness or the virtue of kindness in this situation, but not both.

I conclude that none of the traditional theories can be regarded either as descriptive of Moral Reality in the way that Copernican astronomy is descriptive of our solar system, nor as offering the correct decision procedure for doing the right thing and avoiding doing the wrong thing. Rather, I should see each of them as a heuristic device that focuses my attention in a slightly different way on the costs to Person 2 of any proposed action by Person 1. When faced with a moral question, I need to adopt the Perspective of Person 2, the person who stands to suffer most for a proposed action. Is it reasonable for this person to accept what is going to be done to them? Would they regard the benefit to Person 1 as justifying their own burden? I think this consideration can even block the extreme Utilitarian proposal to cut up one healthy person to save five terminal patients. Although the sacrifice is a great benefit to each of the five, it is unlikely that any one of them would agree that it would be reasonable for them to give up their life if they were healthy. It is reasonable to conclude that no healthy person is obliged to give up his life to save five terminally ill people.

As better prudential decisions reflect better knowledge and more appropriate concerns, so better moral decisions seem to reflect better epistemic and emotional conditions of decision-making. To engage in moral theorising is to evaluate critically the ‘oughts’ and norms that stem from other cultural sources of normativity, including prudence or self-interest, manners, custom, and conventions. As prudence requires me to learn more than I perhaps know now about the long-term consequences of various courses of action and to care more about certain things than I do now, so does morality. Moral progress, the growth of moral knowledge, depends on this process of expansion of factual knowledge, including an understanding of other people’s lives and experiences, and an extension of concern.

To help to determine whether I care enough about the things I ought to care about it strikes me that it is important to attend to the grievances of others. My own reaction to moral injury—to being lied to, betrayed, abandoned, or exploited—is to complain of mistreatment, brooding over my grievance and announcing it to others, seeking acknowledgement of the wrong and an apology or compensation from the perceived offender, or even attempting to retaliate by harming my persecutor. Moral injury may also pertain to a group. ‘We’ may then voice our discontent or outrage, seek acknowledgement and compensation and perhaps revenge. We may seek to recruit allies to help us to press our moral grievance against the perceived offender. Since ancient times, there have been slave rebellions and sailors’ mutinies, sex strikes, presentation of petitions, public demonstrations and riots in the street, picketing and work stoppage by unions, and other forms of collective action by persons who believed themselves to be victims of moral harm. Such complaint and protest situations are invitations to observers to consider or reconsider their existing values. At the same time, I have to recognise that the grievances of the complainers are not always sincere and justified, and conversely that many people suffer moral indignities and wrongs silently, either because they are afraid to protest or because they do not realise that they are being mistreated.

The history of civilisation, as I reflected on it at the beginning of this enquiry, presented me with numerous examples of interactions between Person 1 and Person or Persons 2 that, knowing what we know now about people and how the world works, can confidently be judged to be wrong. Slavery, routine torture, imprisonment without trial, lynching, the abandonment of infants, the exclusion of women from the honourable professions, and the exploitation of wage labour are practices that I can now declare I know to be wrong. The fact that others have come to know these things as well...
has shaped some of the laws, institutions, and practices of the contemporary world.

In declaring that I know certain moral truths, by making claims about slavery, torture, corruption, deception, warfare, exploitation, and so on, I express the conviction that I have made the relevant factual investigations and critically examined my preferences. At the same time, I am loathe to fall into the sort of moral dogmatism that can encourage scepticism. There are many issues about which I am inclined to think one way or the other but I would not claim to know what is right and ought to be done. Are late second-trimester abortions morally permissible? Here I feel unable to determine what is the best compromise between the interests of a pregnant woman and the interests we ascribe to the foetus—what’s good for it. Either one may be seen as Person 1 deriving a benefit at too great a cost to Person 2. And what if I expand my definition of morality to encompass relations not just between persons, but between persons and animals? Should animals, as it were, have to accept that they are reasonable prey for humans, or should humans renounce the benefits of meat-eating to eliminate animal suffering? Perhaps a more thorough understanding of what it is like to be a fearful pregnant woman, or a foetus, or an animal, or a naturally carnivorous human will make it clear eventually what we ought to do about abortion and meat-eating.

Some moral realists believe that there is a uniquely correct answer to all moral questions whether or not we will ever come to know it. This seems to me deeply implausible. There may simply be no fact of the matter, no moral truth to be discovered. Sometimes I can see that something ought not to be done—some institution or practice ought not to exist—whilst having no clear idea what ought to be done instead. I can recognise a badly run prison system or poor end-of-life policies, but positive knowledge eludes me: I do not know how to organise a prison system in the way in which I know how to ride a bike, or how best to manage intractable end of life pain and desperation in the way in which I know how to bake a cake. I do not even know the conditions under which it is morally acceptable to tell a lie or for one person to kill another. Perhaps someone else does know how to design a morally acceptable prison system or manage end of life difficulties in a morally good way? That is possible—but it is also possible that no one knows these things, and even that no one knows when it is morally acceptable to tell a lie or for one person to kill another. I am still uncertain whether they can be known.

In claiming to know (when I do claim this) the wrongness and rightness of actions, situations, events, and the moral qualities of persons, I think I am committed to the position that no further information—about people, their feelings, or how the world works—that I could gain, nor any correction in the scope and intensity of my caring about things, will cause me to reverse my judgement. But isn’t it always theoretically possible that better information and more appropriate levels and kinds of concern would cause me to retract my judgement? I admit that this is so, yet we are entitled to make some knowledge claims even without being certain what the future will bring. I know that iron rusts in the presence of oxygen, and I am convinced that future experiences and experiments will never overturn this judgement. At the same time, I admit that it is conceivable that I and many other people are deceived about this: it is logically possible that some undiscovered element that is always bound to oxygen causes iron to rust.

I am further persuaded that, just as there is more scientific understanding in the world now than in 300 BCE, there is more moral knowledge as well. This is not to say that each individual in the world has more of each. Nor is it to say that the number of scientifically or morally false beliefs held by human beings all over the world has declined. The number of false beliefs in individual minds may actually have increased with the tremendous increase in population and with the spread of communications. Rather, to say that ‘we’ now know more than we did is to say that as a result of the active pursuit of scientific knowledge and moral understanding, those who have made the effort have been successful. As the world has been shaped and changed by the increase in scientific knowledge and technological expertise, it has also
been changed by the increase in moral knowledge, some of which has been acquired through improvements in knowledge and values prompted by rebellion and expressions of resentment, some of which through ‘experiments of living’ that have either worked out well or have failed. This is not to say that less moral wrong overall is perpetrated now than in the past, or that the number of wrong or abhorrent moral views held by individuals has diminished. New wrongs arise as old wrongs are righted. Nevertheless, many grievous wrongs have been righted to some extent, many others are in the process of being righted, and many others that have not yet appeared may one day be recognised as wrongs and righted.

Earlier I wondered whether there was any role for moral experts. A moral expert of the most expert sort would be a person who would know the solution to any moral dilemma and whose judgements of character, of right and wrong, of what is permissible, forbidden, and obligatory not only could be absolutely relied on, but ought to be absolutely relied on. Could any human being really fulfil this role? Maybe not. At the same time, I accept it that there can be good and bad advice in matters of prudence from those whose predictive abilities and knowledge of likely outcomes are well developed. So why not suppose that there can be good and bad moral advice from people whose understanding of the biases of judgement, the conditions of life, and responses to them of persons involved in morally significant relationships are richer than mine? Their ability to imagine possible ways of restructuring those relationships in better ways would render their pronouncements superior to mine. They ought accordingly to be preferred by me to my own initial judgements, and I should investigate thoroughly the reasonings and opinions of those who appear to have thought most deeply about these matters. But it is hard to distinguish such persons from others who are quick to give advice and opinions, and in the end relying on my own considered judgement is the best way forward I can think of.