Can We Have Moral Knowledge?
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I. Introduction
We think of morality as immensely controversial. There is protracted debate and discussion in the Press and even between friends over: morally tolerable inequality and privilege; sexual ethics and the role of force, persuasion, honesty; just war or no war; treatment of prisoners; consumption; treatment of animals, suicide, etc.

Also, we are made aware of different cultural standards for acceptable control of family members or who may be killed with moral immunity—political enemies, murderers, combatants, civilians, nobody ...

II. Realism and Scepticism
The Realist: The Moral Facts are out there whether I or anyone else ever gets to know them or not. Moral Knowledge is apprehension in our minds of Moral Facts. To have Moral Knowledge is for the mind to have a Thought, expressible in a Sentence, that matches a Fact.

The Sceptic: There are no Moral Facts, just Opinions. We cannot get beyond Opinion to Knowledge.

The Sceptic seems to have the upper hand. But then we may as well conclude that nobody knows anything because all we have are Opinions. This is absurd. We seek, obtain, value, and use Knowledge. We are cognitively equipped to do so.

III. Solution: Don’t start with Opinions but with Knowledge.
We know lots of things...but we also make errors and have gaps. Why?

IV. Examples of Things I Know
   a) Common Sense. The sun rises every day. Water quenches thirst.
   b) My Preferences. I like ice cream and long walks.
   c) Scientific Facts. The sun is about 93,000,000 miles form earth. Flame is excited luminous particles.
   d) How to Do Some Things: Ride a bicycle. Tie a slip knot.

Could it possibly turn out that I do not know these things? YES (I could be completely mad.)
Is this a reason for me to doubt that I know them? NO
Are there people who do not know these things or believe something incompatible with them or cannot do them? YES
Is this a reason for me to doubt that I know them/can do them? NO

How did I get to know these things? Observation. Reflection. Education. Trial and Error. Being Shown.

V. But
Moral Knowledge (if it exists) does not seem to be like Common Sense Knowledge; Knowledge of My Preferences; Scientific Knowledge; or Knowledge of How to Do Things.

VI. Starting with Knowledge
That is OK. These are all different kinds of Knowledge, arrived at in different ways. Moral Knowledge needn’t be exactly like any of them. So here are some examples of actions I know to be morally good:

1) A politician resigns his post to care for his recently disabled wife.
2) A police officer intervenes to stop a colleague from manhandling a prisoner.
3) A woman tells a family-oriented man who is getting serious about her that she is unable to bear children.
4) A man voluntarily assumes financial responsibility for his child born outside of wedlock and helps to care for it.
5) A teenager takes a wallet full of cash they found on the bus to the police without removing any of it.
6) A mother works long hours to pay for art supplies for her talented child.
7) An employer responds promptly and effectively to an employee grievance.

And some actions I know to be morally wrong:
1) A 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 who has lived with a woman refuses to take a paternity test to establish whether he is the father of a woman’s child.
5) A student writes and sells essays to other students.
6) A mother chains her young child to the bedpost to go to a nightclub.
7) An employer profits magnificently by forcing his employees to work long hours for low pay.

Could it possibly turn out that I do not know these things? **YES.** Is this a reason for me to doubt them? **NO.** Are there people who do not believe them, or who believe something incompatible with them? **YES.** Is this a reason for me to doubt them? **NO.** Could I invent a scenario for each in which the action would have the reverse value? **MAYBE.** Does this give me reason to doubt them? **NO.**

**VII: The ‘Essence’ of Morality**

Morality is the class of actions and practices that involve Person 1’s relinquishing an advantage in favour of Person 2? (Or Group 1 and Group 2). Person 1 might well be tempted to do all of the wrong things and reluctant to do all the good things.

We are not required to be ‘as moral as possible,’ i.e. always to make the greatest possible sacrifices for others’ benefit.

There is no formula for ‘how moral one is required to be.’ Sorry about that, but there isn’t. However, the law will punish you if you violate some local standards.

**VIII. Objection!**
But some people claim to know that e.g., slave labour is permissible or female genital mutilation is morally required.
Reply: So what? There are flat earthers around too. Do I have to concede that they may be right?

**IX. Objection!**
But aren’t you being dogmatic? What is the basis of your confidence? You can’t after all appeal to the *consensus omnium,* introspection, faith in the methods of natural science, or direct feedback?

Reply: Nondogmatic positions and moral confidence issue from the following epistemic conditions that are error-removing. We become aware of:

1) The ubiquity of *exploitation of resources,* *parasitism* and *manipulation* as biological strategies in nature, emulated in social practices.
2) How these social practices harm individuals (human and nonhuman).
3) Psychological mechanisms impairing social judgement: victim-blaming, stereotyping, egocentrism.
4) The contingencies of luck and birth.
5) What it’s like for those on the receiving end of practices by attending to their testimony and grievances—editorials, novels, first-person narratives—and inarticulate signs of distress.

The moral flat-earthers have not given *any* of this much thought. I *know* they haven’t.

**X. Conclusion**
To understand Moral Knowledge don’t think in terms of Opinions needing to have something added to them to ‘match’ the Moral Facts. You will never get there.

Rather, think in terms of how a person or a group actually makes the transition from self-privileging to (some) advantage-sacrificing practices, and how the growth of factual knowledge and understanding of the social world bring this about.

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