Empiricism on moral and religious knowledge

WHAT IS EMPIRICISM?

One central difficulty in drawing a boundary around what counts as ‘empiricist’ is deciding what kinds of experience ‘count’. In the history of modern philosophy, the debate between empiricists and rationalists was largely characterized in terms of experience of the physical world. As a result, empiricists concentrated on sensory experience. But knowledge of the physical world may not be all the knowledge we can have. If we limit ‘experience’ to ‘sense experience’, we can then ask about the place of religious experience in proving the existence of God. If, on the other hand, we extend experience to try to describe a way of encountering moral or religious facts, it is unclear how to distinguish empiricism from rationalism in this area, as many rationalists have understood reason to involve not just reasoning, but a form of intuition that detects, ‘senses’, certain types of facts, e.g. Plato’s nous. A visual model of reason has been very popular. So how have empiricists approached and dealt with the question of moral knowledge and knowledge of God’s existence?

The options

Empiricists deny that there is any substantive a priori knowledge of how things stand outside the mind (see ‘Rationalism on sensory experience’). For any field of knowledge, they have three options: to deny that we have any knowledge in that area, to say that any knowledge we do have is based on experience, or to say that any knowledge we have is trivial (analytic, true by definition).

This last approach has been favoured in another classically problematic field of knowledge, mathematics. It is difficult to argue that mathematical knowledge is a posteriori, so classical empiricists, such as Locke and Hume, and more recently logical positivists such as A J Ayer, argued that maths is trivial. All mathematical knowledge is reached by developing a series of definitions. Trivial knowledge doesn’t need to be obvious, and mathematics – if it is trivial – is a good example of this.

LOCKE: TRUTHS OF REASON

John Locke, somewhat surprisingly, argues that truths of morality and the existence of God can be established by reason because they are truths by definition. As an empiricist, he argues that all ‘the materials of reason and knowledge’ come from experience, either experience of the external world (sensation) or experience of ‘the internal operations’ of our minds (reflection). All of our ideas, however abstract they are, however little they seem to have to do with sense experience, are actually constructed, by ‘the understanding’, out of ideas derived from sense experience or how our minds work. Locke uses a form of the cosmological argument both to derive the idea of God and prove that we can know God exists. We need only the fact, from experience, that we exist, and some analytic truths: We know that we exist and that something cannot come from nothing (analytic truth). So something must always have existed, and everything
else which exists must have come from this (analytic). As we have knowledge and intelligence, we may deduce that this original being is a knowing intelligence (analytic).

He argues that we can know moral truths in a similar way. From our knowledge of the existence and nature of God, and of ourselves as creations of God, we can deduce, as certainly as mathematics, what our moral duties are:

I doubt not but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, IV.III.18).

In order to defend the possibility of moral and religious knowledge while remaining an empiricist, Locke has to argue that such knowledge is largely analytic. (In fact, Locke didn’t have this concept, which was invented by Kant 100 years later. Locke called these truths ‘demonstrable’ and ‘self-evident’. As in the quote above, the model is mathematical reasoning.) It is only because it is not obvious, and we don’t reason well, that people have ever disagreed on such matters.

HUME: SCEPTICISM

David Hume was far more stringent on what counted as a trivial truth, pointing out that many ‘self-evident’ truths were actually simply propositions unjustifiably taken for granted. We cannot know the propositions Locke uses to prove the existence of God. It is not an analytic truth that something cannot come from nothing, nor is it something we know from experience. It is very difficult for us to believe otherwise, but this does not mean that we are rationally justified in that belief. Hume’s general approach to such sweeping statements (another famous one is ‘every event must have a cause’, which Locke is also relying on in his cosmological argument) is to say that they are groundless; we believe them, but we cannot justify them.

Hume attacks each of the traditional arguments for religion, arguing that we cannot establish the existence of God through experience or reason. Of those that are open to him as an empiricist: Against the cosmological argument, we have already seen that he challenges the claim that the universe must have a cause, and he suggests that there is no reason to suppose it has not existed forever; and he argues that it is a very unsatisfactory form of explanation to cite a cause about which know less than about the effect. Against the teleological argument, he argues that we have no experience of the creation of a universe and cannot argue by analogy from the creation of things we are familiar with. If we did, we should, by experience, conclude that like effects have like causes, and so God is neither infinite nor perfect, as the universe is not, nor could we know whether there is only one creator or many or whether it/they are mortal. And against the argument from miracles, he states

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (‘Of Miracles’ in Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding)

The experience of a miracle must always be less certain than the possibility that the experience is somehow mistaken – for all the rest of our non-miraculous experience supports this claim. As Hume does not discuss religious experience explicitly, perhaps we can apply his more specific points against miracles (though we might wonder at their
truth): that religious experience isn’t attested to by men of good sense, education, integrity, and reputation; that human nature enjoys believing things of surprise and wonder; that such experiences diminish in civilization; and that the religious experiences within different religions will cancel out the probative force of the others, since not all religions can be true.

In the area of morality, Hume makes a different sort of move: he denies that morality is about truth at all. Sentences such as ‘abortion is wrong’ don’t state propositions (which can be true or false), they express attitudes. Morality is grounded on our experience of our own feelings. But feelings are not about facts. There can be no moral knowledge because there are no moral facts that we can know or not know. This theory, he claims, is empiricist, since it is based on our experience of our feelings, in particular, sympathy. And the content of morality, he argues, can be derived from those feelings, which are universal in human nature. In this way, he feels he has placed morality on a sure, empirical foundation without committing himself to anything so strange as moral experience as quasi-sensory.

RELYING ON EXPERIENCE: JAMES AND MILL

Of the three options open to empiricists, Locke takes the third option (moral and religious knowledge is trivial) and Hume takes the second (we do not have moral or religious knowledge). William James and John Stuart Mill take the first: experience can establish moral and religious knowledge.

Through survey and analysis, James sought to identify the core characteristic of religious experience, which he argued was a felt, rather than conceptualized, experience of the reality of the unseen. Its significance and authenticity is marked by its connection to a religious attitude, which is ‘solemn, serious, and tender’, embodying ‘a new zest for life’ and ‘an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections’. All religion, he argues, points to the feeling that there is something wrong with us as we stand, and that this is corrected by becoming in touch with higher power. Awareness of this leads to awareness of being in touch with something ‘more’. We cannot know, though, what this ‘more’ is.

John Stuart Mill is an empiricist in ethics, arguing for the moral knowledge on the basis of ‘observation and experience’ rather than ‘intuition’. In Chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*, Mill attempts a proof of the ultimate principle of ethics, that right action is that which conduces to the greatest happiness. Or rather, he outlines the only type of proof he believes is possible for ultimate principles of action, which is not deductive but inductive – based on evidence. There is considerable controversy over the interpretation of Mill’s proof, but only influential contemporary reading is that, in line with his empiricism, Mill claims that the only evidence we have for what is good (desirable), and therefore what we should pursue, is what we do, in fact, desire. Everyone desires happiness, and so there is no more all-encompassing aim for action than happiness.

(Of course, many people desire and are made happy by things we would normally consider morally bad. So Mill’s argument should be interpreted in the context of his earlier argument in Chapter 2, that if people are able to make an informed choice, they choose what Mill calls ‘higher’ pleasures over ‘lower’ ones. Who would choose a life in which the meaningful pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination were absent? Our unanimity on this is our best guide to our greatest happiness.)
This argument doesn’t establish that we should desire and aim at each other’s happiness, rather than just our own; but Mill assumes that this is an analytic truth about morality, that it is concerned with all persons equally.

Mill differs from Hume in that, rather than moral judgments expressing feelings or desires (and hence having no truth value), they are based on truths about our feelings and desires. We may therefore use our experience of what people want in order to achieve moral knowledge.