

# Self-Knowledge and Morality

Anna Linne

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## I. Introduction

In *Self-Knowledge and Resentment*,<sup>1</sup> Bilgrami points out that self-knowledge is unique when embedded in a much wider framework integrating large themes of philosophy and not when it is in a narrow epistemological theme. He is correct that when self-knowledge is embedded in a wider framework, it integrates with the notions of value, agency, intentionality, and morality in general. Of these notions, a moral agents self-knowledge is a variable that may change over time. Thus, a question arises: **assuming a moral agent may increase his self-knowledge, how does the growth of self-knowledge allow the moral agent to act more morally, if at all?** And a related question: **what kind of self-knowledge has the effect of allowing a moral agent to act more morally?**

The empirical world has presented us with numerous examples of learned men and women committing immoral acts and uneducated ones performing admirable deeds of moral worth. Such examples suggest a lack of a necessary relation between knowledge in general and a moral agents tendency to act morally. Many philosophers also argue a lack of connection between knowledge and morality by denying that one can be taught to act more morally. But self-knowledge is unique in the wider framework of ethics and is not merely knowledge. Even though some philosophers suggest that a moral agents moral tendency can never change,<sup>2</sup> empirical evidence denies such a conclusion. We observe that a moral agent may exhibit different moral tendencies toward different people or their moral tendency can change over time. Some moral agents even commit to change their moral tendencies. For example, with loving kindness being an aim, sages and Buddhists shut themselves off from the world to self-reflect and meditate to achieve a higher state of enlightenment and, potentially, to have a higher level of morality. Suppose a moral agents moral tendency can change, and the moral agents self-knowledge can also change. In that case, it is possible that the change of self-knowledge is the impetus for the change of the agents morality.

This essay explores the two questions raised at the beginning regarding whether self-knowledge may affect morality and what kind of self-knowledge may have such an effect.

## II. Morality and Moral Actions

The "what" of morality seems to be of little controversy and can be stated in the simple principle: "Harm no one; rather, help everyone as much as you can."<sup>3</sup> As to the "why" of morality, there are differing theories. Kants ethics gives morality an imperative form, which demands that one acts through reason according to the moral law, with

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<sup>1</sup>Akeel Bilgrami, *Self-Knowledge and Resentment* Harvard University Press, 2012

<sup>2</sup>"You can change the head, but not the heart." Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethic, a new translation by David E. Cartwright and Edmund E. Erdmann*, Oxford University Press, 2010

<sup>3</sup>*The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethic, a new translation by David E. Cartwright and Edmund E. Erdmann*, Oxford University Press, 2010

the moral law being a specially binding kind of obligation. For Kant, being morally good is a matter of following the moral law through reason. Even though Kants ethics is not explicitly theological in basis, one may suspect that Kants ethics, with its special kind of imperative and unconditional duty, seems to be founded on a surreptitious remnant of theology. However, following the principle of "harm on one; rather, help everyone as much as you can" is neither an imperative nor does it require reason at all times. I, therefore, decline to follow Kant in considering categorical imperative and practical reason as the basis of morality. Among the other theories for the basis of morality, I embrace Schopenhauers theory that the human nature of compassion, the desire to alleviate suffering of others or improve the well-being of others, is the basis for morality. I do so because human nature has the most direct and most plausible influence on human actions.

The human nature of compassion has two forms, voluntary justice and loving kindness.<sup>4</sup> If a moral agent acts out of voluntary justice in the proper virtuous sense, not merely obeying laws self-interestedly for fear of punishment, then the incentive of the moral agents action is purely and simply the prevention of harm or suffering to others or the preservation of their well-being. If one acts out of loving kindness, ones incentive is actively to promote the well-being of others or actively to assuage their suffering. With compassion being the incentive and basis for moral actions, compassions two forms, voluntary justice and loving kindness, coarsely correspond to the two aspects of moral action "harm no one" and "help everyone as much as you can" respectively. In other words, an act of voluntary justice is an act to prevent harm to others, while an act of loving kindness is an act to improve the condition of others. All beings that suffer are worthy objects of compassion for us, including non-human animals.

In addition to compassion, among characteristics of human nature, each of us also has the natural disposition to desire our wellbeing egoism, and the natural disposition to desire the suffering of others malice. A persons character is determined by how the three dispositions, compassion, egoism, and malice, stand to one another. Egoism is the principle and fundamental incentive for humans and animals alike, for the urge for ones own existence and well-being is instinctual and pervasive. If one acts out of egoism, he may cause harm to others without aiming to, with such harm merely as a result of trying to attain his own ends. If one acts out of malice, he aims for the other to suffer and can even sacrifice his own well-being to pursue this aim.<sup>5</sup> An act out of compassion is the only morally good action. However, the incentive of compassion is in constant competition with the anti-moral incentives of egoism and malice, making a pure act of compassion a rare event.

Kant demands that a moral act be free of other motives except for the moral law alone. In other words, if one acts from the moral law but he also wants to improve his own reputation, his act is not of moral worth. One may similarly argue that for an act out of compassion to be of moral worth, the incentive of compassion must be unadulterated by any other incentive. However, the demand for a moral action to be purely an act from the moral law or purely out of compassion takes moral action out of normal hu-

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<sup>4</sup>*Id.*, at 202

<sup>5</sup>*Id.*, at 212

man affairs. It is unnatural to demand an ordinary person to stamp out any incentive of egoism. For example, even the most selfless person acting selflessly toward others contains the motive of desiring egoistically the conscience of being a good person. Therefore, the purity requirement for a moral act to be untainted with an egotistical motive makes an unnatural requirement for humankind and takes morality out of ordinary considerations. Unless we wish for the study of ethics to be science without objects, much like alchemy, it seems unreasonable to demand the absolute purity of the moral agents virtuous incentive. Thus, a reasonable definition for a moral action should be an action arising out of compassion, which may or may not be tainted by an egoistical motive. It is, of course, even better when a moral action has a pure compassionate motive and compassion and is untainted by other motives. Acting out of compassion is distinguished from the ethics of Aristotelian eudaimonism in that eudaimonism has a primary goal of acting kindly for ones own happiness. In other words, the incentive for eudaimonism is both virtue and ones own happiness. Kant also combines virtue and happiness with his idea of the highest good, which he considers the ultimate consequence of morality.<sup>6</sup> While both eudaimonism and Kants idea of the highest good combine virtue with happiness, it is not necessary for moral action to bear a relationship with happiness. The incentive for acting out of compassion may or may not intermix with personal happiness. Thus, we state that the reasonable definition of moral action is an act that arises from compassion as a primary motive with some form of egoism that may or may not be happiness. In contrast, a malicious motive of any kind has no place in moral action.

The obstacle for one to act morally is not that one does not ever know how to act out of compassion, but to act out of compassion towards everyone consistently. In life, even the most immoral persons can have someone they care for. Cruel and unkind as they may be to most, they can be thoughtful and devoted to a select few. For the maxim of "harm no one; rather, help everyone as much as possible" that embodies how to act morally, it is not that immoral persons do not ever refrain from harm. They just do not exercise the refraining toward everyone, especially those they ought to refrain from harming. It is not that immoral persons do not help others. They just do not extend the help to everyone, especially the ones who they ought to help. Therefore, a first key challenge for a moral agent is to be able to extend compassion to everyone. Not all refraining from harming and help to others are moral acts because they may be obligations. When a police officer harms a mass murderer who would have gone on to injure innocent people, or when a doctor saves a patients life on the operating table, those acts are not of particular moral worth because they are expected as part of the police officer and the doctors obligations. However, if the police officer refrains from harming the mass murderer when he could do so to save the lives of the innocent or when the doctor refuses to help the patient on the operating table when it is within his ability to give the patient the help needed for a full recovery, we call such acts immoral.

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<sup>6</sup>Kant says: "virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the highest good of a possible world." Kant, I. & Reath, A. (1997). *Kant: Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy) (M. Gregor, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 5:110-111.

Thus, a second key challenge for the moral agent is to avoid acting immorally by failing to perform their moral obligations.

Thus, as a moral agent faces the two challenges to act morally, two corresponding considerations are important to morality and moral actions. First, to be moral, a moral agent should extend the coverage of "do-no-harm" and "help others" to everyone and all sentient beings. Second, to avoid being immoral, a moral agent should know his roles and moral obligations pertaining to the roles to ensure that those obligations are performed. As shown in the following section, these two considerations connect self-knowledge to morality, such that they reveal the answers to our two questions raised at the beginning of the essay. First, assuming a moral agent may increase his self-knowledge, how does the growth of self-knowledge allow the moral agent to act more morally, if at all? Second, what kind of self-knowledge has the effect of allowing a moral agent to act more morally?

### III. Self-Knowledge and Morality

Kant thinks that self-knowledge has a significant role to play in ones morality. He claims that one can never truly know oneself.<sup>7</sup> Under Kants metaphysics of transcendental idealism, there is a division between appearances and thing-in-itself. Self-consciousness, the basis for self-knowledge, belongs to human cognition and can only reveal what appears internally to us but never reveal the thing-in-itself of our true self. This is the case despite our privileged access to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is a form of human cognition and must be structured by certain *a priori* forms space, time, and causality. These *a priori* forms are not extrapolated from the experience of objects but are the very conditions of the possibility for the experience. Kant also claims that one has a first duty to know oneself,<sup>8</sup> though not in terms of natural perfection, but in terms of moral perfection in relation to ones duty. I take it that Kants statements about not being able to truly know oneself and about having a duty to know oneself are not contradictory because although one can never truly know oneself, to the extent one can know her own moral perfection in relation to ones duty, one should have a duty to know oneself. The two considerations of morality I raise do not require self-knowledge as a duty but merely as a possibility. They require the moral agent to exercise agency and be judged morally from the agency.

#### (1) First Consideration

To discuss the first consideration, "to be moral, a moral agent should extend the coverage of "do-no-harm" and "help others" to everyone and all sentient beings," we first

<sup>7</sup>"The depths of the human heard are unfathomable." Kant, Immanuel, et al. Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. Oxford University Press, 2019

<sup>8</sup>"This command is "know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself," not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart-whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the *substance* of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral condition." *Id.*



turn to the metaphysics of existence. The ancient Sanskrit text, the *Upanishads*, describes the world we live in as one interconnected universe with a single and unifying underlying atman. Each object in existence has a different articulation of the atman, with each articulation being a brahman. Kants metaphysics of thing-in-itself and appearance can be said to reflect the reality described in the *Upanishads*, provided that Kant also believes in one interconnected thing-in-itself for all existence. I embrace the metaphysics of existence reflected in the *Upanishads* because if each object has its own thing-in-itself, how can we explain the connectedness among objects we observe? Where would the boundaries be? If we take metaphysics of existence reflected in the *Upanishads* as true, the same metaphysics has to also be true for the metaphysics of ethics. Thus, each moral agent is an articulation of the interconnected world that underlies our existence. The interconnectedness of the world and that of the self and others are reflected upon as a form of self-knowledge because such an idea is a belief. Compassion to all is possible when a moral agent possesses such self-knowledge of interconnectedness. Consequently, due to possessing this self-knowledge, it is possible to extend the coverage of "do-no-harm" and "help others" to everyone and all sentient beings.

As we come to know the sameness with others that we previously consider as being different from us, we become more compassionate. For example, when the novel "Uncle Toms Cabin" opened the eyes to the humanity of the negroes, more people became more compassionate towards slaves, which led to the eventual abolition of slavery in America. Similarly, as more people understand the love shared between same-sex partners is no different from the love between heterosexual couples, they come to act more justly and are more compassionate towards same-sex partnership. The interconnectedness of the world awaits moral agents to reflect so that their compassion can be extended to all. It is a form of self-knowledge and not knowledge in general because, without being able to sense or intellectually conceive what the thing-in-itself is like, the self's interconnectedness with others can only be a belief. A belief is a form of self-knowledge. Upon believing the self's interconnectedness with others, the seed of compassion takes shape when a moral agent can identify with the object of compassion. The capacity of compassion is further cultivated through experience or imagination. This is not to say that all compassion is achieved through a belief of interconnectedness with others. The intuitive compassion such as that in a young child requires no additional belief. However, genuine learned compassion, from which growth in morality is possible, is arrived at from the belief of interconnectedness with others.

## (2) Second Consideration

We now turn to the second important consideration of morality and moral actions: to avoid being immoral, a moral agent should know his roles and moral obligations pertaining to the roles to ensure that those obligations are performed. Many moral theorists treat the acts of moral worth as the focus of ethics. Compassion being in constant competition with the anti-moral dispositions of egoism and malice, the tendency to commit immoral acts is as constant, if not more so, as the tendency to act morally. Therefore, the focus of ethics should be as much about not committing immoral acts as it is about

acting morally. Further, a moral agent's existence is dynamic, changeable through time. As the moral agent moves across space and time, different roles and obligations arise for the moral agent because of dependencies and reasonable expectations from others. The moral agent must dynamically and constantly address the different obligations that are called for by each situation.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*<sup>9</sup>, the hero Gilgamesh at first is an oppressed king. Through his effort and struggle to find immortality, he comes to understand his role in the world as a mortal and a king, and he lives out his life being a good king serving his people. A moral agent may live a life taking on many roles, a parent, a teacher, an employee, or a passer-by who is the only one around to help when someone is dying of an injury by the roadside. Each role may impose obligations on the moral agent to do something particular. Inadequately performing these obligations may cause harm to others, and such inadequacy may be immoral. For example, doctors carelessly treat patients causing them serious harm or even death, or parents neglect their children. There is also double evil, i.e., when one is supposed to be in a position of trust to render help, he intentionally harms instead. A moral agent must grow into the various roles and understand the obligations that come with them. In addition to the individual roles that the moral agent has to take on, the moral agent may become part of various groups and take on group agency for a joint endeavor with others and take on obligations by way of the groups' commitment. Group commitments may or may not be of moral worth. To carry out the morally required obligations, the moral agent must possess the desire to perform such actions. Desire, like belief, is a form of self-knowledge. 20

Thus, the two considerations of morality involve the self-knowledge of belief and desire: a belief for the interconnectedness of the self and the rest of the sentient beings and a desire to perform the obligations from the roles the moral agent takes on. Belief and desire are intentional states and possess two properties: transparency and authority. The property of transparency refers to the intentional states of belief and desire being immediately known by the self, i.e., the first order presence of the intentional states, and the property of authority refers to the intentional states being known, i.e., the second order presence of the intentional state. (Bilgrami 2012) The transparency and authority properties of belief and desire allow the moral agent interactive access to the special kind of self-knowledge important for morality. The dynamic nature of belief and desire is reflected in the dynamic requirement of moral obligations. We thus establish the relationship between self-knowledge and morality to answer the two questions raised in the beginning. The growth of self-knowledge affects morality. A special kind of self-knowledge is a belief of the interconnectedness of self and the rest of the sentient beings. Such a belief expands the moral agent's compassion to everyone. Another special kind of self-knowledge is a desire to perform moral obligations that arise from a moral agent's various roles. Such a desire allows the moral agent to avoid being immoral by neglecting obligations they ought to perform. 21

## IV. Conclusion and Further Remarks

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Compassion, the basis for morality, stands in constant competition with anti-moral dispositions of egoism and malice. To increase a moral agency's tendency to act more morally is to increase the moral agent's tendency for compassion. As an existence in the world, the moral agent is subject to the metaphysics of existence, the metaphysics that distinguishes appearance and an interconnected thing-in-itself of the world beyond the reach of human consciousness. Thus, what one moral agent will act in any given circumstance, although not always random, is not completely determined, i.e., not fully known to human consciousness. How the moral agent's compassion stands against egoism and malice cannot be fully known to the consciousness of either the moral agent or others.

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If one is committed to increasing the tendency to act morally, the tendency of his own or that of youth under his education, one should work to improve compassion for all beings, i.e., to acquire learned compassion. Just like planting a seed is no guarantee for the seed to grow into a plant, efforts to improve compassion do not necessarily bear fruit. That is because the metaphysics of existence governing metaphysics of ethics set forth a part that is inaccessible by human consciousness and is beyond the law of determinism. But just like planting a seed increases the probability of it growing into a plant, increased tendency for compassion increases the tendency for a moral agent to act morally. For a moral agent to increase his tendency for compassion through self-knowledge, there are two steps. He should (1) hold the belief that the self is metaphysically connected to all sentient beings and he ought to extend the coverage of "do-no-harm" and "help others" to everyone, and all sentient beings, and (2) hold the desire to perform all obligations that come with the roles he takes on to ensure that his obligations are performed. Not only is the special self-knowledge crucial for the development of compassion, but it is also the key to knowing the content of morality or immorality. Thus, contrary to what Schopenhauer insists about the impossibility of improving one's morality, we draw a hopeful and optimistic conclusion that there lies a possibility to improve a moral agent's tendency to act more morally or less immorally.

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Endnotes

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<sup>9</sup>An epic poem written in Akkadian during the late 2nd millennium BC.