Kagan on Moral Knowledge

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1. Questions for Discussion

1.1. Shared document

https://livewarwickac-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/pysdag_live_warwick_ac_uk/ESlN8tVur3Wvig?e=sclhSB

1.2. Questions for Discussion

Please have these in mind these while reading the text.

What does Kagan claim about the role of intuition in gaining moral knowledge? Is his claim correct?

Is Kagan right about the parallel between physical and moral intuitions?

What is the relation between Kagan's position and Rawls' notion of reflective equilibrium?

Given Kagan's position, what are the limits of moral knowledge?

1.3. Background

1.3.1. What are intuitions?

Kagan (2023, p. 164) writes, 'I can easily imagine someone wanting a fuller account of what exactly an intuition is. I find that a difficult thing to provide.' Kagan goes on to hint that an intuition is an 'appearance' that is 'produced, or at least apparently produced, by reason' (Kagan 2023, p. 164). He also asserts that intuitions are not beliefs on the grounds that 'One needn't accept one's intuitions' Kagan (2023, p. 165).

Kagan's view seems to me close to one Bedke (2008, p. 253) considers—'intuitions are sui generis seeming states [...] which are like [..] seemings based on sensory experience [...] in the way they justify.' (Bedke also offers the idea that 'intuitions are understandings of self-evident propositions, where such understanding alone is sufficient for justification.')

Other philosophers offer inconsistent stipulations about intuition. To illustrate, according to Sinnott-Armstrong et al. (2010, p. 256): 'When we refer to *moral intuitions*, we mean strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs.'

1.3.2. Background on physical intuitions

Non-experts have incorrect physical intuitions. To illustrate, they will reliably judge that a projectile exiting a spiral tube will subsequently follow a spiral trajectory (McCloskey et al. 1980). Why?

Sometimes when adult humans observe a moving object that disappears, they will misremember the location of its disappearance in way that reflects its momentum; this effect is called *representational momentum* (Freyd & Finke 1984; Hubbard 2010).

The trajectories implied by representational momentum reveal that the effect reflects impetus mechanics rather than Newtonian principles (Freyd & Jones 1994; Kozhevnikov & Hegarty 2001; Hubbard et al. 2001; Hubbard 2013). And these trajectories are independent of subjects' scientific knowledge (Freyd & Jones 1994; Kozhevnikov & Hegarty 2001). Representational momentum therefore reflects judgement-independent expectations about objects' movements which track momentum in accordance with a principle of impetus.[1]

We might therefore conjecture that physical intuitions are based on impetus mechanics. This would explain the spiral trajectory judgements observed by (McCloskey et al. 1980).

Why is this significant? Impetus mechanics makes computing trajectories and other physical quantities relatively fast (compared to Newtonian mechanics).[2] Impetus mechanics is also reliable within a limited but useful range of situations—those in which objects move horizontally rather than vertically, gravity is unchanging, and so on. So impetus mechanics was all humans needed for nearly all of the last few hundred thousand years. Only recent technological changes expose the limits of physical intuitions.

Conclusion: physical intuitions are reliable enough to be a source of knowledge—but only within limits. Their reliability is limited to situations that were frequent and significant in human experience over evolutionary timescales.

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[1] Note that momentum is only one of several factors which may influence mistakes about the location at which a moving object disappears. See Hubbard (2005, p. 842): 'The empirical evidence is clear that (1) displacement does not always correspond to predictions based on physical principles and (2) variables unrelated to physical principles (e.g., the presence of landmarks, target identity, or expectations regarding a change in target direction) can influence displacement. [...] information based on a naive understanding of physical principles or on subjective consequences of physical principles appears to be just one of many types of information that could potentially contribute to the displacement of any given target'

[2] See Kozhevnikov & Hegarty (2001, p. 450): To extrapolate objects' motion on the basis of [e.g. Newtonian] physical principles, one should have assessed and evaluated the presence and magnitude of such imperceptible forces as friction and air resistance [...] This would require a time-consuming analysis that is not always possible. In order to have a survival advantage, the process of extrapolation should be fast and effortless, without much conscious deliberation. Impetus theory allows us to extrapolate objects' motion quickly and without large demands on attentional resources.'

Glossary

reflective equilibrium A method that is supposed to provide justification for claims. The idea is to gather considered judgements about particular situations and attempt to identify principles which from which those judgements could be inferred, and then to adjust the judgements and principles so that they cohere. The canonical statement is Rawls (1999) (but Rawls 1951 is a useful earlier statement). Authoritative secondary sources are Knight (2023) and Scanlon (2002). 2

representational momentum Sometimes when adult humans observe a moving object that disappears, they will misremember the location of its disappearance in way that reflects its momentum (Freyd & Finke 1984; Hubbard 2010). There are several competing models of representational momentum and related phenomena involving misremembered location (Hubbard 2010). 3

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