

Conditions for Ethical Knowledge

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Introduction

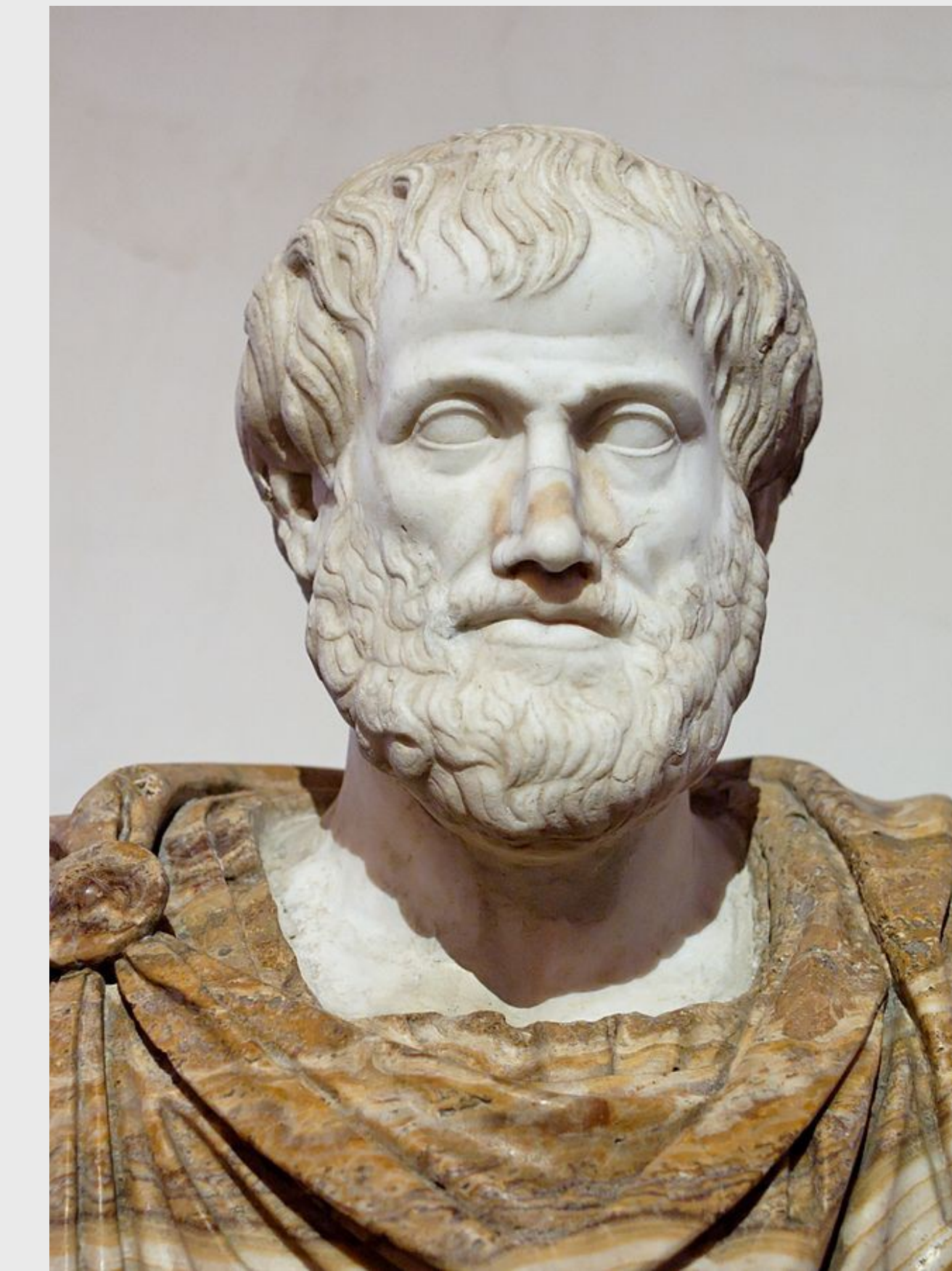
The study of right and wrong conduct and moral knowledge is one of the oldest in philosophy. To pursue moral questions, we first have to elucidate what it is we're aiming for, why, and how we're going to get there. For example, the opening line of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* states "Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every action and choice, seems to aim at some good, and hence it has been beautifully said that the good is that at which all things aim." (Aristotle, 2002, p. 1) In this first line we see established that for Aristotle, what is ethical lies in the process of becoming and the thing that we aim to become. But, in order to make suppositions like this, we must first be able to understand how "good" exists or arises, and how we can come to know it. For example, John Stuart Mills approaches this issue in his work titled *Utilitarianism*, where he states "The subject is within reach of the faculty of reason, which doesn't deal with it solely by moral intuitions such as the intuitionists believe in. Considerations can be presented that are capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof." (Mill, 2002, p. 6).

I hope to research the question of how moral knowledge comes to exist, if it indeed does, and how we can distinguish objective moral knowledge and compelling moral truths from ethical opinions.

Moral Knowledge and Error

Moral Knowledge and the Genealogy of Error by Nicholas Smyth introduces an important meta-ethical idea which is important for any inquiry into moral truths. All ethical theories must establish how we come to know their answers as moral truths. If we can't explain how we come to know it as a truth, we have no reason to presume it to be truth. In the specific sense this tends to refer to things like emphasizing happiness or duty. But in a more fundamental sense, it refers to questions like, do we come to know moral truths intuitively or through reason, or through another process entirely? As Smyth establishes, this then presents a hurdle that all moral systems have to deal with which becomes apparent when we observe historical developments in morality and moral thinking. It is easy to see that throughout history, countless individuals and cultures have come to radically varying and constantly contradictory conclusions about moral truths, despite all people having access to the same fundamental intuitions, rational faculties, etcetera.

So, if we are to posit not just a means by which we can come to moral truths, i.e. through reason, but also intend to posit specific moral truths to be inherent and objective, then we must be able to explain how so many people all got it wrong. While this article is very useful I believe for the subject, its largest limitation is its very broad focus, which prevents it from establishing complete stances on its own, though it does provide a valuable question to ask when asking if we've found a valid system for finding moral truth, can that system account for why many so many people have evidently made an error?



Expected Conclusions

I anticipate that it will be difficult to find a clear path to demonstrate necessary good. I expect however to be able to identify several of the barriers which must be overcome in order to do so. I also expect to identify and examine historical attempts at proving ethical necessity to see where they may have failed or made error. I do not expect to find any system which has truly demonstrated absolute and undeniable necessity, or else I'd be confused as to why it hasn't been taken up by all philosophers everywhere.

Methods

As a philosophical paper with a non-experimental subject, this paper will not be based on any hands on research. Of more immediate use will be citations and readings from prominent philosophical texts.

Significance

The question of the possibility of moral necessity, and the ability to judge whether moral necessity has been demonstrated, has immense implications for our lives. If we can demonstrate a proper way to live, that is an obligation for all people to follow. And, if such a thing is not possible to demonstrate, then no morality is necessary and it all must, in some capacity, come down to preference before truth.

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The Hierarchy of Goods

As argued by Aristotle, all goods exist in a hierarchy. That is to say, either being good is a property of their being, they're good in themselves, or they're good because of their relationship to something which is good, and so their goodness is dependent on some other, greater good. So we may say that happiness is good in itself, and money is good only insofar as it helps us get happiness. So we can approach goods on the standards of this hierarchy and how they relate to other goods.

This observation can be a useful tool for determining the scope of our discussions about ethics. Subordinate goods are not the matter of our concern, what we're interested in is things which are good by necessity. This also gives us insight into the relationships between goods, because if we're looking to demonstrate necessity, you can't prove that a thing is good by referencing a good that is subordinate to it, as that would result in a circular argument.

Limitations of Ethical Theories

Also of importance to us are examining potential shortcomings of existing moral theories. For example, in *Ethical Intuitionism: A Structural Critique*, Danny Frederick indicates that intuitionist systems can become problematic as they have no way to present a genealogy of error which does not hinge on something beyond intuition.

Similarly, *Why Cornell Moral Realism Cannot Provide an Adequate Account of Moral Knowledge* by Elizabeth Tropman presents the argument that trying to prove ethical knowledge empirically leaves us to some degree lost, as the 'good' is not findable in nature and all systems of ethics which use empirical research depend on presupposing what is good.

These types of papers can provide insight into how we can look at ethical systems when trying to judge them and their ability to demonstrate necessity.