

Beyond Moral Bewilderment

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Where is Moral Knowledge?

We live in a day of moral bewilderment and confusion. It is not the first time this kind of thing has happened. A social critic named “Isaiah” described his time as one in which the populace was pervaded by evil-doing. People were devoted to getting their own way, fulfilling their own desires, regardless of the well-being of others. Justice was perverted in the courts and in the streets and homes. Aggression and hostility reigned in personal life and in the affairs of business and government. People blindly fumbled about in an atmosphere of manipulation and deceit. Truth, he said, “stumbles in the public square,” and is not available to those who need it. Anyone who refuses to engage in evil becomes a prey or victim to those who do ([Isaiah 59:3–15](#)).

History shows that this is a recurrent condition of humankind. There is a steady downward pull on human life, and special counter-forces are required successfully to resist it. In their absence, lives, dynasties, and nations crumble and fall. Many today think that, if our current state of affairs is not quite as Isaiah said, we are steadily moving toward it. Sometimes this is attributed only to enhanced will to evil. But one way of characterizing the condition of North American society at present is to say that moral *knowledge*—knowledge of good and evil, of what is morally admirable and despicable, of simple right and wrong—is no longer available in our world to people generally. It has disappeared as a reliable resource for living. That is not the only factor involved, perhaps, but it surely is an important one that needs to be addressed. As a result of this disappearance, people find it easy to call good evil and evil good, as Isaiah also noted ([Isaiah 5:20](#)). Almost any opinion on moral matters can now be voiced with a straight face and an expectation to be taken seriously, even by those in opposition. This is because there is no available, recognized body of knowledge of good and evil against which those opinions can be evaluated. Today you can call anything you want “good” without fear of being *shown* to be mistaken. One can always reject a moral statement, or a moral reason for acting or not acting in a certain way, without appearing *unlearned* or *ignorant* or *stupid*. Those categories simply do not apply now to moral matters. One can only be “diverse.” You may hate or respond violently to the person who rejects your moral judgments or your reasons, and that at least “makes sense.” But if you say they are not smart or are uninformed, *that* “will not compute.” And if someone decides to do what is wrong, that, it is now generally thought, cannot be because they lack *insight* or *understanding*. It is simply their sentiment or choice, or perhaps their “tradition” or “lifestyle.”

A lost world

It has not always been so in this country. Indeed, the disappearance of moral knowledge and its effects is a very recent state of affairs. Less than one hundred years ago, European and North American societies lived in the light of a shared body of knowledge concerning good and evil. That knowledge was not perfect, to be sure, and the world of that day certainly did not adequately “live up to it.” But *progress* in moral goodness and rectitude was assumed to be

something everyone understood, and it was assumed to be a responsibility of individuals for their own lives, as well as the responsibility of social, political, and governmental entities at all levels. Such progress was keyed to understandings of goodness and rightness in the possession of every competent individual and of every leader in human affairs.

Indeed, in North America especially, there was a powerful social current known as “the Progressive Movement,” which aimed at the wide-scale reform of human life on the basis of what everyone at the time knew to be morally right and good; and there was tremendous social pressure, not always justly applied, supporting the actions and lives “everyone knew” to be right and good. Judges, legislators, and administrators of all kinds routinely and with few second thoughts performed their duties in terms of this common understanding. When one examines the *content* of the consensus on moral knowledge that prevailed in those days, one sees that it was an elaborated version of the vision of the good person, right action, and the good society that comes down through European history from the Bible and historical Christianity, interacting with the great thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome. That vision carried forward into the modern and contemporary eras the teachings of benevolence and justice, of well-doing and well-being, that are rightly associated with Jesus and with the prophetic tradition in which he stood.

Such statements as these are today apt to be met with skepticism or even hostility. That, indeed, is part of the configuration of the current disappearance of moral knowledge from public life. Everyone is “politically” suspect because—it is assumed—there is no rationally moral place to stand. But what we have just described is amply, even overwhelmingly, documented in the literature and practices of that day.

Anyone wishing to look into how moral knowledge and practice were treated at the turn of the last century can find an easy entrance on the academic side through a book titled [The Field of Ethics](#) (1901), by George Herbert Palmer, a professor of philosophy at Harvard in this period. Deeper and more difficult treatments are by Josiah Royce, a younger colleague of Palmer, in his [The Philosophy of Loyalty](#) (1908) and his [The Problem of Christianity](#) (1913). Deeper still, but more basic and more intellectually influential, was the work of T. H. Green, much of it published in his [Prolegomena to Ethics](#) (1882). Among popular writers who convey the same picture of the public mind, and even more emphatically, one should consult the [writings of Samuel Smiles](#), especially his [Self-Help](#) and his [Character](#).¹ If you look into these works, prepare to be shocked and incredulous, for you will be looking into another world so far as assumptions about morality and moral knowledge are concerned. They are systematically neglected by the academic world today.

The meaning of ‘knowledge’

Now, when I speak of the *disappearance* of moral knowledge, I am *not* saying that it does not exist, or that it is unattainable. Those are views sometimes maintained in academic circles and by cultural icons who presume to be “in the know” about such things. I cannot take those views up here, but I believe them to be profoundly and clearly mistaken.

I *am* saying, however, that moral knowledge is no longer, as it once was, readily available to persons in the normal course of their lives. You cannot assume it in social interactions or in the lives of individuals around you. That is “the disappearance of moral knowledge.”

We *have knowledge* of any subject matter when we *are capable of representing it as it is on an adequate basis of thought and experience*. That is what “knowledge” means in ordinary life, and what you expect of your electrician, auto mechanic, and physician. The subject matter might be the English alphabet, the history of golf, the structure of the hydrogen atom, or others. The “adequate basis” can, sometimes must, include the word of others who have knowledge. We call our knowledge in that case knowledge by “authority”—though the word is more august than the fact. By far the most of what we know we know “by authority,” but that does not mean that it cannot be questioned or, in most cases, that there are no other ways of discovering it or verifying it. Most people who know the multiplication tables have never yet thought out a tiny portion of them to see for sure, and why, they are true. But they do know them, because those tables are given to them in a social context that warrants their acceptance as true. And they are true, and it is possible for a bright and enterprising child to think them out to see that they are true and why they are.

But knowledge can “disappear.” This is because its public presence and availability depends upon the maintenance of a social context with authoritative institutions that sustain, refine, and disseminate it. If for whatever reasons social institutions fail to do this, the respective knowledge will “disappear,” cease to be available. It is easy to imagine circumstances in which the knowledge underlying the technologies of modern life, for example, would disappear—a long “nuclear winter,” for example, or an asteroid impact, that left only a few human beings alive, who for several generations could only just manage to survive. Knowledge of many ancient languages and cultures has, in fact, disappeared. Currently there is great concern in various quarters that the knowledge that indigenous peoples have of the medicinal properties of plants and animals in their surroundings will be lost as their societies dissolve into global culture. That kind of thing can and does happen.²

Why and how

But how did moral knowledge disappear? Obviously not because of wide-scale destruction of organized society, as in nuclear warfare or an asteroid strike. Not yet, at any rate. Still, a cataclysmic change has occurred in the institutions of knowledge and learning in the Western world. This is the transformation of the very idea of knowledge in such a way that now the moral life cannot be a subject of knowledge, but only of tradition, sentiment, and opinion or “faith.”

In its early stages this transformation rejected religion, and particularly the Christian Church, as a source of knowledge. That amounted to the secularization of knowledge, and left the moral traditions of Christianity to float free, in the public mind, from any connection with historical or transcendent reality. Knowledge *as such*, for the emerging *institutions* of knowledge—becoming the “research” universities as we now know them—had to be *secular*. Here is an overriding imperative that few if any today would question.

The second and final stage of the transformation was that knowledge had to be *scientific*. That meant in practice that “knowledge” had to be derived by application of methods of research acknowledged within the various particular sciences, from physics to experimental psychology, shall we say. So far as moral knowledge—not to mention knowledge of God—was concerned, the earth might as well have been hit by an asteroid. Under these conditions, moral knowledge disappears totally from the institutions of knowledge in the Western world, and is no longer routinely accessible to those who need it.³ For moral knowledge had always dealt with “the thoughts and intents of the heart,” with character, with good and evil; and those, to put it simply, are not subject matters with which any recognized science deals. Simply look and see.

Of course such restrictions on knowledge are wholly unwarranted. They amount to an arbitrary *redefinition* of knowledge, driven by a desire to control it. They lay knowledge and reality on a Procrustean bed, cutting it to suit a preconceived method rather than—as had always sensibly been done—requiring a method to suit itself to the subject matter.

Reputation for Knowledge Is Power

Why would anyone want to do that? Now *there* is an important question, and to it there is a very significant answer. It is because so very much is at stake for modern humanity in its “Faustian” mode. For not only is knowledge power, as Francis Bacon said, but *reputation* for knowledge *is* power in human affairs. Knowledge confers the *right* to act, to direct action on the part of others, to teach, and to plan and set policy. That is why it is so important whether or not a moral teaching is regarded *as* knowledge, and why for some it is so important that none should be so regarded. For on the basis of moral knowledge others, or you yourself, could be told what to do, and freedom to do what one wants would be lost. Alas!

Therefore, what *counts* as knowledge determines who has knowledge or has a reputation for knowledge—and who does not—and who therefore has authority to direct life and determine policy. *It is this fundamental issue that underlies every one of the much-debated issues in public life today.* It is this which automatically makes the “research” university a political force, because the university is the *de facto* institutional authority on knowledge and what counts as knowledge in our culture. And for it knowledge is secular and scientific.

This means that *the* institution of knowledge in our world does not make moral knowledge available, but rather disowns it. Every other institution of society stands under its sway, including at present the Christian Church. At least as the church stands in the public mind, it is not seen as a vital source of knowledge about reality and human existence, but—at best—only as one cultural tradition among many.

Lord of the Questions

Now, over all this scene, the figure of Jesus Christ still stands in the public mind. Of all the great thinkers of the past or present, none comes close to him for influence in the direction of life. He shows up on more magazine covers and in more of journalism than any other person, and his

name is repeated in cursing more than any other. His cross has immediate meaning to more people than any other historical symbol.

There might be many ways in which people would try to explain this, and certainly there are many ways people interpret him. But those of us who have confidence in him as Lord of Life should be able to understand that his prevalence in human affairs on earth is due to his sound, intelligent, and testable answers to the basic questions of human life.

Jesus provides the best answers to the most important questions of human life. Official institutions of knowledge in the modern Western world, now stripped to their secular core, simply provide *no answers at all* to those questions. But Jesus Christ still stands as a teacher in human history and answers the basic questions of well-being and well-doing with which the great minds of the ages have always struggled. His answers invite the most careful intellectual and practical evaluation, side-by-side with all alternatives, challenging any and every one to put them to the honest test of life. It is in thoughtful, persistent practice that the authority with which they come to us across history is found justifiable.

Jesus tells us that human well-being is found by living interactively with God in his kingdom, now present on earth. All else—money, power, reputation, fame, “feeling good”—fall short when taken by themselves. He tells us that the good person, the one worthy of love, support, imitation, and companionship in all things, is the person whose life and character is permeated with the kind of love God has for us and for all his creation. This person is the one who steps forward into leadership and the professional life with the character and strength to translate the highest ideals into reality. And Jesus tells us that the way into all of this intelligent well-being and well-doing is through *becoming his apprentice*, right where we are, in kingdom living. We learn to lead our lives *with him*, thereby learning to live our lives as he would if he were we.

This, in a very tightly packaged form, is *the moral knowledge that Jesus makes available to the world*. Compare it carefully to all the best possible alternatives. It is important for one who now would live it out, and who would present it *as* knowledge, not to be arrogant or close-minded about it. Indeed, it forbids any such posture altogether. Its representatives through the ages, including the ones mentioned in the references above, have worked very hard to live and present this knowledge in the manner Jesus himself would have done so for their time and place. Name the great ones and keep them before you: Augustine, Martin Luther, Johannes Kepler, John Wesley, John Woolman, Frank Laubach, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and on and on.⁴

We can follow their example today. In all our personal and professional connections, we can possess and present the knowledge of good and evil for which the world languishes, but which has been for a while eclipsed in the public mind. As we experientially live out Jesus and his teachings in daily life, we are his students, whoever and wherever we are; and in such a life, we “shall know the truth, and the truth will make us free” into the good life of the good person in the Kingdom of God ([John 8:31–32](#)).

We must identify one another in our life context: communicate and organize as is appropriate. It is primarily our churches and their pastors and leaders who have the position and platform to lead in such a life. They must take up the challenge to do so. Knowledge is much too important to be left to the universities and secular institutions. But “church” must not be thought of narrowly. It refers to the people of Jesus Christ upon the earth. The teachers and leaders in all of its institutions worldwide—from local churches to colleges and universities, professional schools, organizations of businessmen and women, and governmental leaders—must stand out and up in society, as voices of the light that has come and is coming into the world from the person of Jesus Christ. “In him was life, and this life was the light of men” ([John 1:4](#)). Let us say this, and make it real. Together.

Notes

[1.](#) A fairly adequate treatment of the public mind on moral matters one hundred years ago is contained in Gertrude Himmelfarb’s [The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values](#) (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). This book gives excellent references to names and literature to be followed up on for a more detailed grasp of the world before the disappearance of moral knowledge.

[2.](#) Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams are recent philosophers who have discussed how moral knowledge disappears. See MacIntyre, [After Virtue](#) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). Chapter One: “A Disquieting Suggestion.”

[3.](#) The story of the institutional disappearance of moral knowledge has been told with excellent insight and scholarship by Julie A. Reuben in her book, [The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). This is a must-read for anyone deeply interested in the status, or lack of status, of moral knowledge in our times.

[4.](#) For the lives of many of the great Christ-followers through history, consult Richard Foster, [Streams of Living Water](#) (San Francisco. HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). It will make you proud of God.

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