

Response to Mary Poplin’s “The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge in Education”

**Mike Austin
Eastern Kentucky University**

**Prepared for the Symposium on Dallas Willard’s
The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge
Biola University’s Center for Christian Thought
May 14-15, 2019**

Our Situation

The subject matter of this symposium as it relates to education, especially university education, calls to mind something that Calvin College philosopher JKA Smith said a few years back on Twitter, “When someone tells me they are a freethinker, I know pretty much everything they believe.” The point is, of course, that this reveals a problem for so-called freethinkers and the epistemic status of some of their views. Similarly today, in general terms, most secular universities—and I’m thinking of the humanities and social sciences here—attempt to produce people of the same political persuasions and passions generally associated with freethinkers. Unfortunately, many of the political and moral beliefs undergirding such an education are not really put to the test in the classroom, as far as I can tell.

As I read Dr. Poplin’s paper, two incidents came to mind that reflect much of the concern she so aptly details in it, and reflects the lack of critical analysis related to these beliefs. Two years ago, one of my students, a young Catholic woman who was very involved with the pro-life student group on campus, shared an experience she had with another professor. My student was walking to class, from a parking lot. A professor in our women and gender studies program was behind her talking on the phone. As they walked, my student heard the professor mocking her and the pro-life buttons on her backpack.

This reveals several problems. First, it shows a moral failure on the part of the professor. Whatever one’s definition of a good professor, and a good person, it should be clear that mocking a student for their political beliefs in such a manner is unacceptable. (Such things are best done with a cynical attitude and a knowing smile, in our offices as we deride such students with other faculty.) Second, it reveals the hegemonic status not only of secularism, but of a certain secular “progressive” understanding of morality, politics, and social change. Third, it reveals the hypocrisy often present in the contemporary university.

The second incident that comes to mind happened several years ago. A professor on my campus challenged our university’s decision to offer health benefits to the same-sex partners of employees at our university. He also challenged the prevailing “progressive” beliefs about sexuality, from a conservative Roman Catholic theological and philosophical point of view, in the university’s student newspaper. You can imagine the response. Almost every member of the psychology department challenged his claims about same-sex relationships and human flourishing in letters to the editor in the university newspaper. The way that they did that was to

simply note that the American Psychological Association no longer sees any problem with the orientations or behaviors of individuals who identify as members of the LGBTQ community. This simple appeal to authority was thought to settle the issue. But more than this, one psychology professor also cited a study in a letter to the editor that purported to show that those who vocally oppose homosexuality in some way are themselves likely latent homosexuals, and implied that this was the case with my Catholic colleague. I defended my colleague in the paper, pointing out the flaws in the reasoning and the attacks. I also took all of the letters to the editor, from people on both sides of the issue, and had a wonderful discussion with my Honors students about all of the informal logical fallacies present in them.

I share these stories simply to underscore what we all know. The university as we know it is in trouble. It is no longer a “uni”-versity. The understanding of who counts as a “good person” is pretty thin. In many ways, the university is no longer a marketplace of ideas, but a platform for some to work for social change, often at the expense of a quality education. And this is not isolated to the ivory towers of our country. It flows from those towers out into the culture. Ultimately, it does deep damage to individual lives and the society in which we live.

Thoughts on Restoring Moral Knowledge

I fully agree with the two suggestions offered with respect to the two ways we can help restore moral knowledge: (i) offer a Christian account of the good person; and (ii) be active as public intellectuals, reaching beyond the university to foster discussion and knowledge related to the kinds of questions Dallas Willard asked and encouraged us to ask: Is reality secular? Who is a good person? What is required for human flourishing?

I’d like to add, however, that while I understand the reticence to engage our more dogmatic opponents, I do think that we “have time to...be part of an open dialogue with committed antagonists.” I would argue that sometimes it is good to engage in open dialogue, even with those who are intransigent in their recalcitrance, because those who observe and listen to these dialogues may benefit from them. Our fellow believers on campus and in the community will be edified and encouraged, and their faith strengthened as they see that there is a strong case to be made in favor of what Christians believe about a host of things, including moral knowledge. In addition, one way that we can help convince those who are at least open to the possibility of moral knowledge is to engage even the committed antagonists, show what is wrong with what they believe, and make the case for our own views about moral knowledge. The antagonists may not benefit, but others may.

Related to this, our secular colleagues have some access to moral knowledge that is grounded in the character of God, though it is perhaps indirect. This is something we should make use of as we do our work. We can find common ground, insofar as there is knowledge about morality, human selves, and human flourishing, that is available outside of special revelation. I’m not claiming that Poplin disagrees with this, I’m merely claiming that this opens up more avenues to those of us who want to put moral knowledge back on the map. For instance, we can translate Christian moral knowledge that is ultimately grounded in the character of God through philosophers like Aristotle and Plato. We can point out the case for the cardinal virtues in Plato’s *Republic*, for example—wisdom, courage, moderation, justice—then go on to Aquinas and discuss the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—giving students and others a chance to understand and embrace the truth. We can talk about Aristotle’s views concerning moral development, and then consider whether simply trying hard is sufficient for moral growth. We can tap into the experiences of our students and others, of falling short in their moral lives, and

point out that the Christian view is that merely working hard is not enough. We need divine forgiveness, assistance, and grace, if we are to become the good persons we are meant to be.

We can also employ the empirical work available to us via positive psychology to make our case. As Poplin points out in her paper, “scientific findings that relate to human flourishing reveal the advantages of living Christianly”: physical and mental health, longevity, the family, education, and more.

As we employ empirical work to make our case, we must emphasize that these are not *merely* empirical questions. We must hold up, defend, and use philosophical, theological, and spiritual knowledge. But we should, in wisdom, show how empirical evidence supports the forms and content of the moral knowledge we seek to disseminate.

Empirical knowledge can be useful for particular questions in both moral philosophy and moral theology. For instance, the plausibility of philosophical and theological accounts of character traits and their connections to human flourishing can be enhanced or undermined by empirical data, because the subject matter is not *merely* conceptual. The application of such accounts to the everyday lives of human beings will have empirical elements, and empirical data may increase or decrease the level of justification that exists for claims included in these accounts.

As an example, I used empirical data related to humility in my argument that it is an important virtue for human flourishing, understood within the framework of Christian theism.¹ Humility plays a prominent positive role in one contemporary psychological model of personality structure, the HEXACO model, giving the model greater explanatory power. Humility is also conducive to emotional well-being. It is empirically linked with prosocial traits and behaviors including gratitude, forgiveness, generosity, and cooperation.² That humility has these connections, fosters these virtues, and is conducive to emotional well-being all counts in favor of its status as a virtue, regardless of what Hume, Nietzsche, and followers of Ayn Rand claim. We need more of this kind of work on other Christian virtues, such as faith, hope, and love, at the academic and popular levels.

A Question and Conclusion

First, a question. In the section, “How is Education Coping With the Disappearance of Moral Knowledge?”, Dr. Poplin discusses the encouraging development of more character education programs in K-12 schools. I wonder about the current and future status of character education. Over the past few years, when I ask students in my introduction to ethics courses if their schools had such programs, the numbers who say yes are declining. I merely pose the question if this is a nationwide trend, or just something happening in my own current state of Kentucky? Either way, it seems to me that this is one essential way to not only help moral knowledge reappear, but do so in a way that helps individuals understand and seek to become good persons.

Finally, I enjoyed Dr. Poplin’s thought-provoking paper. I was challenged by her paper. I was encouraged by her paper. And I was motivated by her paper to back and help my students, players, and others I love get and live out the moral knowledge that they need.

¹ *Humility and Human Flourishing: A Study in Analytic Moral Theology*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

² It is good to be humble in part because it is good to be in deep interpersonal relationships. And it is good to be in such relationships in part because the virtues and abilities required for those relationships help to make one a good person. Humility is conducive to this end and to developing other virtues needed to pursue and achieve it.