

The Primacy of the Individual in Reclaiming Moral Knowledge

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Opening Comments for the Symposium:

1. Willard is fairly clear that the disappearance of moral knowledge is a social fact brought about by various historical causes, and professional ethics did not do anything to either theoretically counteract or substantiate the disappearance. Professional ethics/philosophy was something like an accomplice in the historical shift of public consciousness away from maintaining moral knowledge *as* the way things actually are.

“...what we are talking about here as ‘the disappearance of moral knowledge’ is not a philosophical position but a public fact. It is the unavailability of moral knowledge as such in current society....it is not itself a philosophical conclusion, or even a logical inference....So we need to give some thought to the causal factors involved in the disappearance of moral knowledge. We have just now said that the disappearance of moral knowledge was not brought about by some dramatic discovery, but by a pervasive shift in mass attitudes concerning what seems plausible and implausible....In the chapters to follow we intend to go back over some of the main developments in the field of professionalized ethical theory that have accompanied the cultural progression outlined in this first chapter. It will *not* be our aim to explain or evaluate these theories simply as ethical theories, but specifically to consider how *moral knowledge* fares in each one....We hope it will become clear that the disappearance of moral knowledge, in the manner reviewed, is not an expression of truth rationally secured, but is the outcome of an historical drift, with no rational justification at all or only the thinnest show of one” (7–8, 44).

2. One way of understanding Willard’s argument is this: since no rational justification has been given for the idea that moral knowledge does not exist or is unattainable, what is needed to reclaim moral knowledge as a publicly available resource for moral life is a compelling theory of moral realism that can find its way into the field of professional ethics and the university, and, thereby, resituate moral knowledge as publicly accessible.
3. On this way of understanding Willard’s argument, chapter 8 is a bit of a let-down. First, we do not get a very developed theory of moral knowledge. And, second, Dallas is very pessimistic about any such theory finding its way into the university:

“I cannot imagine any circumstances in which institutions of higher education as we now know them could teach moral knowledge...given the processes of professionalization of faculty that are now dominant, I cannot imagine any significant block of university faculty assuming responsibility for the development and communication of moral knowledge along the lines here suggested, or otherwise” (377).

4. While there are still moves to be made in rehabilitating moral knowledge on this way of understanding Willard, there is another route available that Willard appears more optimistic about and makes better sense of what we find in chapter 8.

“In short, people who possess a good will are those who can restore moral knowledge to the public arena. That would be done in the practices of such individuals in their communities, guided by appropriate teaching and proclamation. Knowledge is made real to people in general only by living it out in reality, and then, of course, it has to be interpreted and explained” (377).

5. Dallas had a fairly radical view of the individual person’s responsibility to become a good person. He believed that one’s own moral standing is “the touchstone for moral theory” (360; see DCC, 88). It is through individual persons seeking to become good persons that moral knowledge can be reclaimed.

“Thus, being a good person is always a personal achievement. A good person is one who chooses to be a good person, and who seeks out and implements means for becoming good...It may be that such a choice cannot even be entertained, much less made, unless one has the ‘luck’ to be brought up in a certain kind of society—perhaps one in which moral knowledge is publicly available as such” (374).

6. But now it *may* seem that we are in a bind: the way to restore moral knowledge to the public arena is for individuals to become good persons and yet publicly available moral knowledge is necessary to become good persons.

7. It is in response to this problematic that we can view chapter 8 in a different manner.

“In my view, however, the *moral* guidance offered by society always has to do primarily with what sorts of persons we must be in order to be *good persons*” (372).

8. What is missing when it comes to publicly available moral knowledge is a vision of “what sort of persons we must be in order to be *good persons*,” so in the absence of this publicly available vision of the good person what we need is “to identify clear cases in the extension of ‘good person,’ and then further useful descriptions of *the good person* can be developed from the clear cases and tested against other cases” (358).

9. And this identification of good persons, it turns out, isn’t hard to do:

“Now, for my part, I believe there is moral knowledge accessible to any thoughtful person, even though there is now no generally acknowledged body of moral knowledge. This accessible moral knowledge is rooted in our non-empirical awareness of the will and its properties... The most elemental moral knowledge is quite direct” (367).

“It is therefore possible to know in some cases whether persons are good or bad, and to what extent... It is also possible to have knowledge of the ‘dimensions’ of the good person, and of obvious points of relationship between them. It is possible to represent those dimensions as they are, on an appropriate basis of thought and experience, or to fail to do so. One could, therefore, intelligently aim to be a morally good person in a community of shared understanding and knowledge of moral goodness. Is this not commonly done?” (375–376).

“Much moral knowledge, but not all, remains quite simple and straightforward...” (376).

10. The way Dallas put it elsewhere:

“How do we alleviate the famine of moral knowledge in our world? We employ it [i.e., moral knowledge] ourselves, and then we model and teach it to current and future generations of leaders, assessing our progress and techniques along the way” (DCC, 111).

“the good life, both individually and collectively, only emerges from the prevailing characteristics and actions of the particular persons who make up a population. The particular person is primary because only individuals are capable of action. Corporations, organizations and institutions can only function as a direct result of the work of individuals asserting their will” (DCC, 115).

“You now are the ones who must think your way forward into an understanding of the good person and the good life, and be responsible to lead the way for the society and world in which you and your children will, if we are fortunate, have a life” (380).